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Biography

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WILLIAM OF ORANGE.

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OSCAR WILDE



OSCAR WILDE (1895)

(From the photograph by Ellis & Walery)

OSCAR WILDE

BY

G. J. RENIER, P.H.D.

WITH A FRONTISPIECE

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TO
JEANNE RENIER

I

PROFESSOR OF AESTHETICS

WE have travelled far since the deplorable 'seventies and 'eighties. But some things there still are which this changing England of to-day has in common with its grandfathers. One of them is the distrust, the fear is perhaps not too strong a word, of beauty. I remember how, a few years ago, a detective, giving evidence about a raid on a disreputable house, declared in a hushed police court: "On opening a door in front of me I perceived a room decorated in the oriental taste." In the dock, the tenant of the house of wickedness wilted. The wretch was lost, and knew it. "A room decorated in the oriental taste"! It is certainly difficult to visualise an orgy among antimacassars and Victorian bric-à-brac. And yet . . .

Bewhiskered, philoprogenitive, sabbatarian, righteous and wealthy, the English of 1880 and thereabouts played their endless game of tory-liberal see-saw when they took a rest from the arduous task of money-making by proxy. But they felt insecure. A band of *illuminati* insisted on preaching the cult of a divinity that was

un-Christian and therefore unsuited for gentlemen—Beauty. The votaries of the “aesthetic” school who claimed descent from Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris, Ruskin and Burne-Jones, and declared that Algernon Swinburne was of their persuasion, attacked the very foundation of society, the home. “Tear away,” they told a bewildered public, “those heavy, gaudy curtains that imprison you, the ridiculous wallpapers between whose successive layers prosper the nimble flea and insects more sinister, smash the large plate-glass mirrors with expensive frames of sham gold. Admit into your houses our draperies of sober and delicately harmonising hues, that are agreeable to behold and agreeable to touch; paint your walls in soft tints to show up the pictures and the bevelled mirrors with black frames slightly relieved with gold!”

The sinister exterior of the Victorian house was also the object of the aesthetes’ scorn. To the genteel façade with its mixture of Greek columns and Gothic arches, its plate-glass and its machine-made, exuberant and adventitious ornamentation, its restless gables and tortured skyline, they preferred the plain, honest and harmonious architecture of the period of Queen Anne. Those who lived in the new houses were surprised and pained.

The apostles of the new cult prided them-

selves upon having discovered what was beautiful in nature and in art, and considered that their taste entitled them to decide what deserved admiration. This was rather arrogant in a country that had a press and the Royal Academy. They favoured Botticelli ; they wantoned with the Middle Ages. One of their first principles was that all arts are intimately interrelated ; they tried to practise several, and were ready to hold forth on all. But about their poetry there was an element of obliquity : they admitted their awareness of the existence of the passions, and wrote archaic lines about love and desire in a way that earned them the name of " the fleshly poets."

The aesthetes also criticised the ungainly garb of the male, the trim of his hair and the furniture of his brain. They asked him to think, and to think new thoughts. They were more dangerous than Unitarians.

With the healthy instinct that has always made it distrust novelty, English society defended itself. *Punch*, already the exponent of flatness and sanity, mustered its forces. It was not very difficult to score hits, for the aesthetes, or at any rate the more enthusiastic among them, were highly vocal, which is another way of saying humourless. Humour is the defence of the all-but-mute. The aesthetes were always yearning after intenseness, and their language was

studded with irrelevant hyperbole. Their metaphor thrived on exaggeration, their vocabulary on the superlative. Their prophet Ruskin had set the fashion when collecting the colourful epithets round which he wove his art-criticism. To these new *incroyables* all things worthy of approval were "supreme," "consummate," "utter," "quite too preciously sublime."

During the season of the year 1878 the aesthetic movement found a new exponent, if not a new leader. A young Irishman of twenty-four, just down from Oxford, with the superficiality, the wit, the charm and the good complexion of his compatriots, established himself as a "professor of aesthetics" in the English capital. He was of good parentage, but not particularly well connected in England, and his achievements were some creditable academic honours and a sheaf of poems, a few of which had been published in various reviews, mostly obscure. His Oxford connections opened certain doors to him, which he entered in a spirit of exuberant adventure. Soon curiosity gained him admission to more houses of the rich and influential. His appearance was striking and not unpleasant, his voice attractive and of a volume sufficient to lend his sayings a weight that passed their intrinsic merit. In conversation and in the lecture-room he poured out the

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aesthetic doctrines in their unalloyed purity. He put his theories into practice, and lived and dressed the part of the reformer.

People in London talked of his Oxford days that had been a preparation for the London mission. It was known that Oscar Wilde had sat for a brief period at the feet of thundering Ruskin, imbibing his theories of art, and that he had taken part in some of the prophet's utopian exercises, when undergraduates went road-making in a manner that was even more futile and less economic than the labour of convicts. He had absorbed the aestheticism that was in the air, and soon decided to make it his own. Oxford wondered at the exquisite cut of his clothes, which were still of the orthodox pattern, at his ties, and at his rooms in Magdalen College, which were the best in the University. They had a lovely view of the river and of the bridge. They were entirely panelled, and the two sitting-rooms were connected by an arch, the folding doors between them having been taken away. The walls were covered with engravings, many of them representing women "in the nude," as popular writers who shun stark Saxon delight in saying to this day.

In his exquisite rooms Oscar entertained lavishly. Visitors were always sure to find cigars, and punch or brandy and soda, when

they called for the endless conversations in which their host delighted. They were also asked to admire his really fine collection of blue china. Whether Oscar liked it for itself or for the pleasant sound of the words "blue china" is not certain. "I hope I shall be able to live up to my blue china," he said, and not once only, and fifteen years later he put this phrase into the mouth of the hero of an unfinished play. The words "blue china" rolled from his lips with a sonorousness that justified the existence of the porcelain better than its shape and colour. For at Oxford, a phrase was already more to Oscar than an object, a sentiment or a principle, and colours were a caress to his ear rather than to his eye.

Oxford had not accepted Oscar's pose without protest. It is true that he was fond of riding, but otherwise sport counted for him only as a spectacle. He was a regular attendant on the cricket field and at the oarsmen's practice, but never took part in their exercise. The public schools, which had discovered sport in the early 'sixties, had by this time turned out a legion of undergraduates who valued systematised physical exertion more than Christianity. In the eyes of many of his muscular fellow-students, Oscar was something at once effete and uncomfortable. One day a crowd of young empty-heads set upon him, bound

him, and dragged him up a hill. When they released him, he flicked the dust off his clothes, and calmly declared : " Yes, the view from this hill is really very charming." His retort to a hurt by merely ignoring it was neither charity nor cowardice. The external world was but the blurred outline of his dream. What did not please his eye was simply eliminated.

Apart from posturing and dabbling in the aesthetic cult, Oscar had fitted himself for a wider life by serious study and diligent reading. In 1876 he obtained a first class in Classical Moderations, and in 1878 a first class in the final school of Literae Humaniores. Meanwhile, in 1877, he visited Italy and Greece, where he became acquainted with the Italian Renaissance and with the latest discoveries of archaeological excavation. He saw the statuettes that had been recently unearthed at Tanagra, and returned full of genuine enthusiasm for them. The subject of the poem for the Newdigate prize happening to be Ravenna, which he had visited in the course of his journey, he competed and won the prize. The public reading was a great success, to which his golden voice contributed probably more than the qualities of the poem.

These were the things London knew about the young aesthete, and soon he provided the town with further matter for conversation.

Like the dress reformers of to-day, he considered that protests against the clothes of his age were not enough. He therefore began to wear an "aesthetic costume," consisting of a loose shirt with turn-down collar and a large tie, usually green, fastened in a flowing knot, knee-breeches and silk stockings, and a velvet coat. His face was clean-shaven, his brown hair long and flowing; his headgear was a velvet *béret*. He invariably donned the "aesthetic" attire at night, but he also began to appear in it during the daytime, and, gradually gathering courage, he ceased to wear any other costume. He professed an admiration for large and striking flowers like lilies and sunflowers. Is it true that he was in the habit of carrying one or the other when walking in the street, and that he looked at it in an absorbed and ecstatic manner? Or was he merely seen once taking a bouquet of sunflowers to an actress he admired? In any case, his favourite flowers were not always available, and this reduces the alleged habit to a seasonal affectation. There is a conflict on this point between contemporary witnesses. From the amount of uncertainty that exists about his life, Oscar might have been born in the heyday of the Renaissance.

The motives of Oscar's conduct are difficult to disentangle. His was a complex personality, and his psychology is more elusive even than

the facts of his existence. His aestheticism was no invention of his : he found it ready-made in the lectures of Ruskin and, as we shall see in the next chapter, in the writings of his elder contemporaries. However paradoxically set forth, many of his doctrines sprang from conviction, and were a natural and wholesome reaction against the moral and aesthetic stagnation of the period. He undoubtedly wanted reform. But self-seeking was part of his equipment. He realised the effectiveness of self-advertisement. He was not affluent and was living upon the capital of his meagre paternal inheritance. He wanted a reputation and a competence. He hoped London would give him both, and was engaged upon a systematic siege of the town.

Certainly, the pose was successful in one respect. Everywhere people were taking notice. Once invited to a house, Oscar was sure to make his mark there. His voice, as we know, and the things he said with it, were not easily forgotten. He had already found the formula for his paradoxes : the inverted proverb was the peak of his conversation. Between the peaks he would unfold the pasture-land of story and parable. But his talk was not only paradox and glitter. His power of repartee was brilliant, and gave proof of a sharp and nimble wit. And, in flashes, he revealed the possession of a

fine and profound understanding. In brief, society discovered that its clown had wisdom. It was a discovery that did the clown no good.

In July 1881 there appeared a volume of poems by Oscar Wilde, beautifully printed on Dutch hand-made paper, and bound in white vellum decorated with gold. The price was half a guinea. The poems were not of the first order, though for sensuousness and colour they were unimpeachably "aesthetic." Marlowe, Milton, Keats, Tennyson, Arnold, Browning, Dante, Gautier, Baudelaire, and many others echoed through the pages. The verse was artificial, but showed considerable technical skill. Wilde himself, in later years, looked upon the volume as a youthful indiscretion. The critics were merciless and the public enthusiastic. Each annihilating review sold an edition. In four weeks there were four reprints, and a fifth was sold out soon after. Oscar Wilde did well out of his poetry; the work was a commercial success, and provided the money he badly needed. He also derived an uncertain income from lecturing and anonymous journalism.

It has been said that Oscar Wilde adopted knee-breeches and the aesthetic pose in order to find a publisher for his poems. It has also been said that he published the poems in order to justify himself before the world by producing a little after talking much. It is unnecessary to

look for recondite motives in all the doings of an immature young man. The poems were written, they found a publisher, and they were published. That is all.

Notwithstanding the authoritative tone he adopted, his actions and his sayings again and again betrayed his youth. He was careless of the words he spoke, provided they sounded well. He spared no feelings, and made enemies. He affected an unbounded belief in himself, and society pretended to take him at his own valuation, though it made merry behind his back. He arrived late at lunch one day, and the hostess reproved him with a glance at the clock. "And what do you think the little clock knows of what the great golden sun is doing?" he asked her. It was all rather foolish and not a little irritating. But again, Oscar was so very, very young. If only he had been wise enough to wait, to read for the bar, or to do social work in the East End! His talent would have pierced through, sooner or later.

As it was, Oscar piled mistake upon mistake. He was a snob and a climber, and society admitted him, half-heartedly, with the contemptuous tolerance it feels for those among its betters who demean themselves by adopting its standards. Society knows two virtues only: a fictitious one, birth, and a transient one,

wealth. Oscar possessed neither. He had talent and a spark of genius, and wasted both in his sedulous courtship of the titled and the fashionable.

Society and the crowd enjoyed the bitterness of the attacks of *Punch* on the high priest of aestheticism. The stage followed the fashion. The editor of *Punch* wrote a play, *The Colonel*, which presented a vicious and untrue caricature of Oscar Wilde. He was portrayed as a swindler, Lambert Stryke, who passed for an aesthete, exploited a number of ridiculous ladies, and was finally exposed by the hero, the colonel. The play drew crowded houses for a twelvemonth. While this comedy, an adaptation from the French, was still running, *Patience*, an opera by Gilbert and Sullivan, was produced at the Opéra Comique in London on April 23rd, 1881. The superlatively witty libretto never went beyond the limits of decent fun. It is remarkable that nowadays the bulky poet Reginald Bunthorne is always taken to represent Oscar Wilde. Contemporaries saw in him a mild caricature of Swinburne. Wilde was understood to be portrayed by the rival poet Archibald Grosvenor. In those days (the opera was completed in November 1880) Wilde was not yet the portly figure he had become ten years later. It was a case of nature imitating art, according to the theory so dear

to Oscar. Within a few years' time he grew to be so much like Bunthorne that it was taken for granted that Bunthorne had been drawn in his likeness. The opera was performed without interruption till November 22nd, 1882.

Patience proved a milestone in Oscar's career. It sent him to America, where he found money and a cure for aestheticism. The opera was such a success in England that its promoters decided to present it in the United States. But how was the unsophisticated American public to relish a caricature, when it knew nothing of the original? Why not allow the Americans first of all to see an aesthete in the flesh, and, for preference, the most extravagant of them all, Oscar Wilde? A lecturing agency approached him with an invitation to lecture in New York. Oscar had in his portfolio a play about Nihilists, *Vera*, for which he had been unable to find a producer in London. Perhaps America would be readier to welcome it. He gladly accepted the invitation. Needless to say, there are those who will have none of this story, and deny all connection between *Patience* and the American tour. The time for a learned life of Oscar with voluminous footnotes and a critical discussion of alternative versions has not yet arrived. Let us give ourselves the benefit of this provisional un-

certainty and choose the more interesting alternative.

The young poet did not leave behind him an entirely unappreciative London. He had made friends who mattered. Whistler, the painter, was one of them. Their famous quarrel came later. Edmund Yates, the author and critic, felt a sincere admiration for Wilde, and Ellen Terry accepted the dedication of two sonnets included in the volume of poems.

Oscar sailed on Christmas eve, 1881. American journalists were, then already, in the habit of interviewing distinguished visitors at the time of their arrival, and of asking them to specify the degree of their admiration for the United States and its inhabitants with whom they were still unacquainted. Oscar was more careful than some of those who have gone the same journey since. New York did not yet present visitors with the magnificent view and skyline that make it possible for the wiser among them to avoid talking to interviewers about its inhabitants. But Oscar made the difficult conversation veer into an unexpected channel. "I am not exactly pleased with the Atlantic," he told the reporters. "It is not so majestic as I expected." The saying impressed them. They could not take offence : the Atlantic was not a purely American institution. The papers gave

prominence to Oscar's dictum, and New York flocked to hear him lecture on the English Renaissance at Chickering Hall. It was a great financial success.

Oscar now started upon his pilgrimage through the American continent. The intelligent and the unenlightened came to hear him, expecting different things. The English had been startled when he told them that all was not well with them. Were they not living in the nineteenth century? But when he delivered the same message to the Americans, they were dumbfounded. Were they not Americans? Many people, happily enough, did not take the lecturer seriously. They had not been prepared to do so by the nature of the preliminary publicity which, with an eye to the interests of the Gilbert and Sullivan performance, had called them to see and hear the "English" aesthete. The touching and disarming keenness of Americans to know all manifestations of culture was less prominent in those days. It was not so easy for a merchant of paradoxes to draw an audience, and the common-sense of the Americans was sterner. But the Irish were prepared to welcome their fellow-countryman, the son of a woman who had, for a brief period, been in the van of the Irish nationalist movement. And thus the reception given to Oscar varied from town to

town, and he failed, on the whole, about as often as he succeeded. His impresario soon lost interest in him, and he continued the tour on his own account. Altogether, he lectured more than two hundred times in the States and in Canada.

Boston provided Oscar with the most sensational experience of the journey. Boston was then, as it still is, the most intelligent town in the United States. It was more English than any other, but had not shared with England the strange mental revolution of the 'thirties and 'forties which had resulted in putting a taboo upon intelligence. It was able, therefore, to see that, beneath the harlequinade and affectation of Oscar's mission, there was earnestness, and a conception of life that deserved at least some attention. But near Boston was Harvard, more like an English university also than other colleges in the States. Its students were more closely akin than those of other similar institutions to that curious phenomenon, unknown on the continent of Europe, the English undergraduate, a mixture of childishness and animal spirits almost entirely unabsorbed by intellectual endeavour. And when Oscar came to Boston, the students of Harvard decided to have a "rag" at his expense. A little after the beginning of the lecture sixty of them filed into the hall, dressed in a burlesque of Oscar's

aesthetic costume. They wore swallow-tail coats, knee-breeches, flowing wigs and green ties. Each wore a large lily in his buttonhole, and each carried an enormous sunflower. Oscar had been warned, and appeared, that night, in conventional evening clothes. The result was that a large portion of the audience missed the point of the joke.

Sixty seats in the front of the hall had been reserved by the students. There they sat down, prepared to enjoy themselves uproariously. Whenever the lecturer paused, they burst into vigorous applause. But Oscar was able to cope with the occasion. He soon left aestheticism alone, and began to talk of his own student days. He spoke of Oxford, of the wonderful leadership of Ruskin, and of his influence over the undergraduates of his day. In the end he offered to provide the statue of a Greek athlete to stand in the Harvard gymnasium, and said he would esteem it an honour if the students would accept it. They altogether forgot to applaud, and when the lecture ended, they walked out in silence. Oscar's triumph was complete. By the charm of his voice and the sheer magnetism of his personality he had tamed the least amenable human material, a crowd of Anglo-Saxon adolescents. It is through little incidents like this that we obtain glimpses of the real Oscar Wilde, so often hidden under the

insincerity of a pose or marred by a morbid craving for brilliant and hollow phrases.

The undergraduates' prank redounded to Oscar's advantage. "How mortified I should be if a son of mine were among them!" said a lady in the audience. That ablest of American newspapers, the *Boston Transcript*, wrote on the following day that Boston was indebted to Wilde for "the thoroughgoing chastening of the superabounding spirits of the Harvard freshmen." The journal declared that he remained "gracious, dignified, gentle and sweet," and loaded him with compliments. Boston became the great success of the American tour, and the approval of America's cultural centre was of great help during the remainder of the journey.

The story of the sculptor John Donoghue is a proof that Oscar was not everywhere looked upon as a "funny man." He found him in poverty and squalid surroundings when he came to Chicago. In the course of his lecture he thereupon described his visit to Donoghue's studio, and the beautiful things he had seen there. He said it would be an honour for Chicago if its people would encourage the great artist who lived among them. As a result, commissions poured in, and Donoghue's name was made.

During his stay in America Wilde met Walt

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Whitman, whom he greatly admired. The meeting was a disappointment to both. Oscar did not relish the poverty and untidiness of his hero, who did not, on his side, approve of the affectation of his visitor. Oscar thought the visit "tedious," the term he applied to everything he disliked. The whole tour was probably "tedious," but by the time he took ship he was provided with money for some time to come. He had, whether as a result of the Harvard undergraduates' "rag" or because he had seen reality in America as he had never seen it at Oxford or in London, discarded his costume and allowed an American barber to crop his hair.

II

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OSCAR minus the velveteen costume and the aesthetic pose is, for better or for worse, the real Oscar. Henceforth, and till the time of the tragedy that broke him, his qualities and his defects developed and grew, but he remained what he was, a charmer, an idler, a temperament, an artist. It is time we should make an attempt to find out what were the influences that had moulded him. Let the knowing men who study the inheritance of black spots on the coats of white rats and those who drop babies from their cradles and beat cymbals behind their innocent heads, fight out among themselves which characteristics are inherited by human beings, which are "conditioned" after birth. Let us avoid committing ourselves to statements such as that Oscar's linguistic ability was inherited from his mother, his strongly sexed nature from his father. The scientific fashion of ten years hence might agree with us, that of twenty years hence condemn us, as would that of to-day. Here are some facts about Oscar's

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early years which appear significant to the unscientific mind.

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin on October 16th, 1854. He was the second son of the marriage of his parents, which had taken place in 1851. His mother, Jane Francesca Elgee (1826-96), came of a conservative Protestant family. She was very gifted, had a great capacity for learning languages, and was an excellent classical scholar. She studied till she reached the age of eighteen, and began to write verses, some of which appeared in reviews under the pseudonym "Speranza." In 1848 she contributed to the Dublin *Nation* a nationalist article so violent that it caused the suppression of that issue of the paper. She was a brilliant talker and an accomplished hostess. Her receptions at Merrion Square became famous. She possessed the art of entertaining to perfection. No one was allowed to leave her salon without having met everyone else present. She hovered through the room, picking out of a group a guest who, in her opinion, had been talking long enough with the same people, and with a brief outline of his character or a mention of his latest claim to distinction, introduced him to someone else whom she similarly delineated in a thumb-nail word sketch. On these occasions she wore a voluminous crino-

lined skirt of crimson silk, an oriental scarf round her waist, quantities of lace over her bodice. Masses of quaint jewels dangled from her neck, her arms, her waist. On her hair was a crown of gilt laurels. She had in common with her son Oscar a horror of growing old : in later years she always received her visitors in semi-darkness in order to hide from them the marks of age. They both loved jewels, artificiality, and the society of the wealthy. But above all, they both loved words and phrases.

Speranza often behaved as though a smart epigram, a telling generalisation, were the sole aim of existence. There can be no doubt that she rehearsed beforehand the lapidary witticisms with which she introduced her guests. But she also frequently allowed her tongue to run away with her. Her talk sometimes was very free, and she did not mind, provided what she said was exceptional and striking. "There has never been a woman yet in the world who wouldn't have given the top of the milk-jug to some man, if she had met the right one," she once remarked. Oscar was allowed to listen to this talk from early youth, and learned to accept as the supreme values in life his mother's amorality, her wit and her love of the perfect phrase. "I want to introduce you to my mother," he said to a fellow-undergraduate of

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Trinity. "We have founded a Society for the Suppression of Virtue."

While she was expecting her second child, Speranza somehow persuaded herself that it would be a girl. She did not overcome her regret for many years, and continued to dress Oscar in girl's clothes long after the period customary in her day, while she treated him like a girl as long as she possibly could. I shall refer to this incident at a later stage. Oscar remained devoted to his mother throughout his life.

Oscar's father, William Robert Wills Wilde (1799-1876), was the great-grandson of a Durham business man who settled in Ireland and married the daughter of an old Irish family. The Wildes remained Protestants and became completely Irish. William Wilde was an exceptionally able eye and ear specialist. As a young student he once extracted a large needle from the eye of a fisherman and saved his eyesight, while on another occasion he saved the life of a child who had swallowed a pin by slitting its throat with a pair of ordinary scissors. He founded St. Mark's Ophthalmic Hospital in Dublin, and acquired a European reputation. He was knighted ten years after Oscar's birth. His fine eyes and brow contrasted strongly with his ugly and simian upper lip and jaw. Something similar was noticeable

in Oscar. William Wilde was shabby in his appearance. He was "beyond soap and water," says Bernard Shaw. His private life was irregular : he had numerous illegitimate children, and he was once involved in a lawsuit of which the issue can be boiled down to the question whether a certain girl of good family had been seduced by him or violated after the administration of chloroform. In his youth he went through a grave illness, and the doctor prescribed a glass of strong ale to be taken once an hour. Nevertheless, or, as he believed, because of this, he recovered. Henceforth he looked upon alcohol with more kindness even than most nineteenth-century Irishmen. Though never intoxicated, he was rarely sober. From his mouth Oscar heard the praise of drink as soon as he knew the meaning of words.

Oscar also learned other and better lessons from his father. Sir William was as interested in Irish literature and archaeology as in medicine. He wrote many books on travel and on Celtic antiquities, and was the author of *The Closing Years of Dean Swift's Life*. Oscar often accompanied his parents on archaeological expeditions. He was also repeatedly taken to France and to Germany, and learned the languages of these two countries. His childhood was spent in luxurious surroundings : both his

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parents lived without care of the morrow and had a truly Irish contempt for management and carefulness in money affairs.

In brief, the trend of home influence upon Oscar's early years was towards intellectualism, phrase-worship, literature, flippancy, the love of display, extravagance and the toleration of alcoholic and sexual indulgence. It is also clear that his mother occupied an excessive place in his psychological economy.

At the age of eleven Oscar went to Portora Royal School at Enniskillen. At this Protestant establishment he became familiar with religious conceptions and in particular with the doctrine of sin, which exercised such a fascination upon him in later years. He proved to be a quick learner, though a dunce at mathematics, and read extensively, in particular classical English novels. He was untidy, and not too fond of washing. But he already liked fine clothes and was the only boy in the school who wore a top-hat. He also made himself conspicuous in other ways. He played no games. Moreover, he was clever at giving nicknames, and risked making an enemy rather than forgo the pleasure of a witticism.

At Portora, Oscar was already heavy of build and tall for his age. He grew to be over six foot.

In October 1871, when he was nearly seven-

teen, Oscar entered Trinity College, Dublin. Although he was considered to be "an average sort of man," he won the Berkeley gold medal for an examination in the Greek comic poets. From Trinity he went to Oxford. His contemporaries have probably exaggerated the importance of his contact with Ruskin. The influence that gave a definite direction to his vague aspirations, to all the tendencies he had inherited or acquired in early youth, was not that of the bearded and theatrical prophet. It was the reading of a single book, the *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* by Walter Pater, and especially the "Conclusion" of the original edition of 1873. Remarkably enough, Pater suppressed this conclusion in the following edition, because he feared that it might mislead young men. But so far as Oscar was concerned, it had had its effect. The doctrine that man, a creature under sentence of death but reprieved for a short while, must endeavour to make every moment of his existence supremely significant was a revelation to young Oscar. Pater preached "sharp and eager observation." "Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself," he said, "is the end. . . . To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. . . . While all melts under our feet, we may well catch at any exquisite passion, or any con-

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tribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours and curious odours, or work of the artist's hands, or the face of one's friend. Not to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those about us, and in the brilliancy of their gifts some tragic dividing of forces on their ways, is, on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening. . . . What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions. . . ." In later years Oscar said : " It is my golden book, I never travel anywhere without it. But it is the very flower of decadence : the last trumpet should have sounded the moment it was written."

Oscar also became acquainted with Pater himself, with the shy don who unfolded golden visions in his talk and in his writing, who proclaimed the supreme value of each moment and the significance of every sensation while living a restricted existence among books and a few friends. From him, Oscar learned the doctrine of art for art's sake and the need for the stubborn and ceaseless limning and bur-nishing of one's style. Pater taught him to seek perfection in each sentence. And thus Pater became the great inspiration of his life,

the justification in his own eyes of his cult of beauty and of his search for strangeness, of his laziness and of his later excesses. But Oscar was not made by Pater : he discovered himself through the voice and the words of the revealer.

In the "aesthetic" movement Oscar saw the practical application of his newly acquired wisdom. His public championship of the movement was therefore based upon a conviction sincerely held. It also offered the young man an opportunity to cut a figure in the public eye. This he seized with an eagerness that knew no reserve. Before long his agitation acquired all the outward aspects of posturing. There is no incompatibility between these two sides of Oscar's "aesthetic" campaign. He was deeply imbued with the fundamental barrenness, the utter vanity of life. He perceived salvation in two ways only : in the cult of beauty which alone could endow life with the semblance of significance, and in the affectation of frivolity which treated life as it deserved. So Oscar decided to be a clown, and, like Molière and so many other professional amusers, he made his choice because he shrank from the essential earnestness of his own nature.

The pose was all the English public perceived, and he was never able to live it down.

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When at last he produced serious work, it was distrusted. And the piteous end of his career gave joy to those whose faith in their world of ugliness he had tried to shatter with more enthusiasm than tact.

III

PARIS : WORK AND TURQUOISES

OSCAR rounded off his American year with a witticism. "The English," he declared, "have really everything in common with the Americans—except, of course, language," he added, as though it were an afterthought. This is a typical Wildeism. The formula is transparent : an obvious truth is inverted, and yet, in its new form, it is not devoid of sense. It strikes those who hear it as at most an amusing exaggeration. To us, the saying appears trite. We have heard it so often. But had it been said before ? We should never forget, in judging Wilde's sayings and his writings, that many of his quips have become threadbare by constant use. We should consider them in their historic setting. Fénelon's exquisite *Télémaque* has been spoiled for many generations of Frenchmen by the fact that subsequent authors have turned his original metaphors and similes into commonplaces by ceaseless repetition.

Oscar was conscious of having reached a turning-point in his life. He had entered, so he said, his third period. He was nearly thirty

now, and had not achieved much. He felt the need of a new stage, and chose Paris. Paris was intellectually alert and differed from London in almost every respect. The difference, he thought, would be to his advantage.

In the spring of 1883 Oscar settled in Paris, where he took rooms in the Hôtel Voltaire, Quai Voltaire. The setting was perfect for a man of letters who wanted a dream of luxury, tradition and beauty. There were second-hand booksellers, print merchants and antiquarians in every other house along the Quai and in the side streets. The quaint grace and the entertaining muddle of the shop windows pleased the eye and the mind. Old furniture, prints, old masters and old illustrated books, white church vestments gold-embroidered, carved credence-tables, enamels, decorated earthenware—the Renaissance and the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century offered of their best to the disciple of Pater enamoured of multiple and rare sensations.

From his windows on the second floor Oscar could have surveyed a wonderful view. Below flowed the Seine, and on the opposite bank stood the massive Louvre, rich in historical associations. "Since there are trees and books there, and that women pass by, it is the loveliest place in the world," a Frenchman once said. But in Oscar's opinion femininity was ade-

quately represented by a nude of Puvis de Chavannes over his mantelpiece. And the view, or so he pretended, did not interest him. "It's altogether immaterial," he said to a friend, "except to the innkeeper who, of course, charges it in the bill. A gentleman never looks out of the window." With a few touches, he had turned the furnished apartment into a home. On the large writing-table stood flowers and a vast porcelain ash-tray. He smoked Turkish cigarettes all day long, and kept them in a large box which he carried with him from one room to another.

Oscar was determined to work hard. He had adopted Balzac's motto that constant labour is the law of art as it is the law of life. In imitation of the master whose work he loved and whose ways he was then trying to copy, he sat at his desk wrapped in a monkish robe with a large cowl. Surrounded by books, many of which were works of Balzac or studies about him, Oscar wrote on large sheets of expensive paper. He wrote *The Duchess of Padua*, a melodrama the action of which is based on the fact that the hero and the heroine change their minds with unusual frequency. On her rare appearances, beauty in this work rubs shoulders with tinsel and false sentiment. But Wilde's ideas about life, his affectations and curiosities already show themselves in this early work.

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The Duke of Padua, who dwells beyond good and evil—"failure," he says, "the only crime which I have not committed"—is a precursor of Lord Henry in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. "Why, she is worse than ugly, she is good," says the Duke in the second act. And even the heroine has her doubts about the relative value of virtue and sin, and almost longs for that emancipation from ethics which was becoming Wilde's major preoccupation.

Oh, can it be
There is some immortality in sin,
Which virtue has not? And does the wicked man
Draw life from what to other men were death,
Like poisonous plants that on corruption live?

Oscar also worked at *The Sphinx*, a descriptive poem of much greater value than the dramatic effort he was finishing, but still over-burdened with epithets and straining after effect.

At the same time as Oscar was trying to imitate the labours and monastic seclusion of one period of Balzac's existence, he also tried to emulate his dandyism. It was a little trick played with time, a greedy telescoping of successive phases that showed the depth of his admiration and also the way in which, even when copying, he managed to remain himself. He carried a stick of ivory, set with turquoises and made after the model of the famous *canne de Monsieur de Balzac*. He wore

jewels, like Balzac, and went out into the world. Though he had given up the "aesthetic" dress, he had no desire to turn himself into an everyday figure. He possessed several fur-lined coats, and one of them was of green cloth with broad black frogs. And even his new simplicity, relative though it was, remained affected. He said that he had his hair cut short in order to resemble the head of Nero in the Louvre, and he had it waved every day.

As determined to make the conquest of Paris as he had once been to capture London, Oscar had, upon his arrival, sent round to various famous people copies of his volume of poems accompanied by letters. Several received him, and some, like Edmond de Goncourt and Sarah Bernhardt, were attracted by him. Others, like Alphonse Daudet, were not. Old Victor Hugo was merely bored. Oscar's desire to amaze people stood him in no good stead. The English have at any rate a sense of humour, like the Irish, and they knew what Oscar was about, even when they did not approve. But the French are humourless, and their wit, though verbal like Oscar's, is based upon a cool vision of life instead of issuing from a desire to have done with its seriousness. Most of them failed to understand him. Moreover, his talk, which was already brilliant, did not win him admirers as it had done in London.

Oscar overdid the note of flippancy and the paradox-hunting. Besides, he soliloquised. He had lived for several years in England at a time when conversation was dying, and he had spent a year in America, where it has not yet been born. In Paris, conversation was a national rite ; every participant had a share in the performance. The art of conversation is the art of holding the ball just long enough to show one's dexterity, and of tossing it over in order to allow another person to catch it and perform in turn. The French put their team spirit into conversation as the English put it into sport. Oscar never was a sportsman.

And yet, upon occasion, he could take notice of the presence of someone else, and tolerate his shining for one moment. During his first meeting with the young writer Robert Sherard, Oscar was interrupted by him just as he was singing the praises of the Louvre. "I have never seen the Louvre," said Sherard. "When that name is mentioned, I always think of the *Grands Magasins du Louvre*, where I can get the cheapest ties in Paris." They were in a salon ; John Sargent, Paul Bourget and other great ones were present. Yet Oscar showed no resentment against the over-confident young man who had broken the flow of his enthusiastic talk. "I like that," he remarked, "that is very fine." And he meant it. Afterwards he

explained : " When you bluntly disclaimed all artistic interests, I discovered that you had scientifically thought out a pose that interested me." Affectation fascinated him to such a degree that he respected it, even in others.

Oscar and the rude young man became friends. And he made other friends. For he was, and he remained all his life, a delightful companion. One finds again and again that people who were at first repelled by his outward appearance or by his pose loved him as soon as they knew him better. He was generous, and this egotist could show an unexpected interest in the affairs of his friends. He was always ready with good counsel and with actual assistance. However scintillating and amusing he may have been in a group, he was at his best with only one companion. When he had no audience and was left to grapple with that difficult and entrancing task, the conquest of a human personality and the establishing of a direct human contact, he put all his gifts to its successful performance. Many of those who knew him kept charming memories of Oscar *en tête-à-tête*. And at this period, Oscar was happy. The atmosphere of Paris was congenial, for Paris society considered art and literature matters of importance. He was unconscious of the fact that his light-heartedness so often clashed with the French concep-

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tion of life, which is, like that of all Latins, infinitely more serious than it appears to be at first sight. And he worked, and liked his work.

Without a thought of the morrow, Oscar lived a life of luxury. He went out every night to dine at some fashionable restaurant, at Bignon, the Café de Paris, Foyot or Lavenue. And when, suddenly, money was short, because his American earnings had been spent, or because he was kept waiting for the proceeds of a further sale of property in Ireland, he stayed in his hotel and had an impromptu meal in his rooms. When no money remained, he decided to try his luck in England once more. But very often, as frequently, in fact, as he was able, he visited Paris, and in its artistic circles he remained a familiar figure.

IV

THE STUDIOUS IDLER

IN the autumn of 1883 Oscar once more made London his headquarters. He took two small furnished rooms on the third floor of a house in Charles Street, opposite a mews, near Grosvenor Square. They were oak-panelled, and on the walls hung old engravings in heavy black frames. A retired butler and his wife ran the house, and prepared excellent meals when their tenant could afford to order them. He was very poor in those days. A lecturing agency arranged for him to speak in London and tour the provinces. He spoke one afternoon at the Prince's Hall, Piccadilly, on "The House Beautiful," and the audience was not numerous. He had ceased to be picturesque. Stripped of velveteen, his ideas did not interest the public. In the provinces people were equally indifferent. The agents would have liked him to resume the "aesthetic" garb, but this he steadfastly refused to do.

Provincial lecturing was an occupation Oscar soon came to loathe. The manner in which his arrival was advertised in the papers was

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distasteful to him. He was still announced as an oddity, as something worth seeing rather than hearing. And yet, what he said appears to have been sensible enough. He spoke of "the sins of the upholsterer," and was sarcastic about the ugly crockery and domestic vessels in common use. He extemporised his addresses, and his talk would have been attractive had he not allowed himself to mar his effect by constant exaggeration. Sometimes he returned to London with his pockets full of money, which he immediately shared with poorer friends. When lectures were scarce, he visited the pawnbroker. But he systematically continued to bestow great care upon his dress, and to display the outward appearance of luxury. When he could afford it, he dined at the Café Royal. Not that this meant affluence, for he made with determination for the cheapest item on the bill of fare. And the bottle of *Château des Mille Secousses*, a claret discovered by Whistler, which was consumed on these occasions, cannot have been very expensive in those days. Whistler frequently dined with Oscar. And at Charles Street guests were invited to breakfast, which seems surprising in view of Oscar's oft-proclaimed doctrine that only dull people can be brilliant at breakfast. The meal was followed by liqueurs, and innumerable Turkish cigarettes

were consumed while talk went on till well after midday.

Early in 1884, while he was in Dublin, Oscar met a young woman, Constance Lloyd, the daughter of a Q.C., who had some money and whom he married in the month of May. He did not marry her for her money ; he was genuinely in love. Constance was pretty, with a wealth of brown hair that framed her face and made her look like a picture. She had distinction, an attractive frankness, and a literary taste of her own. The honeymoon was spent in Paris, and they were very happy. When Oscar had to go out to meet one of his innumerable acquaintances, he stopped at the first flower-stall and sent flowers with a little love-letter to the hotel.

Constance Wilde's dowry was used to buy the lease of 16 Tite Street, Chelsea. The house was decorated by Whistler. On the top floor was a white study with furniture painted red. But it was not frequently used, and Oscar did his writing in a small study downstairs, facing the street, at the writing-table that had once belonged to Carlyle. There the walls were buttercup yellow and the woodwork lacquer red. On the walls hung a few Italian and Japanese paintings, and on a red stand rested a cast of the Hermes of Praxiteles. Filled with the sense of his new responsibility, Oscar began

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to look for more work ; his wife's small income was insufficient for the needs of both. He undertook to write unsigned contributions for the *World* and the *Pall Mall Gazette*. He also continued to do some lecturing. He spoke on "Beauty, Taste and Ugliness in Dress," on "The Value of Art in Modern Life," on "The English Renaissance," and on his experiences in America. It is at this period, and in connection with his lecturing activities, that Oscar fell out with Whistler. He much admired the painter, who was one of the greatest wits of his day. When they met at the Café Royal, Oscar always showed him considerable deference. Referring once to something Whistler had done, he said he had behaved "like the fine old Virginian gentleman you are." In 1883 Whistler provided him with some data for a lecture on art to be delivered to Academy students. In 1885 Whistler used the same material in a lecture of his own, and accused Oscar of having appropriated his ideas. He could not bear the thought that Oscar, or anyone who was not himself a painter, should set himself up as an authority in matters of art. In the ruthless and ill-mannered way of which he was master, he attacked Oscar, and then communicated his attacks to the press.

"What has Oscar in common with Art?" asked Whistler, "except that he dines at our

tables and picks from our platters the plums for the pudding he peddles in the provinces. Oscar—the amiable, irresponsible, esurient Oscar—with no more sense of a picture than of the fit of a coat, has the courage of the opinions . . . of others !”

To this Oscar replied : “ With our James vulgarity begins at home, and should be allowed to stay there.” Whistler’s retort was : “ A poor thing, Oscar !—but, for once, I suppose, your own.”

Whistler also made a sneering reference to the “ aesthetic ” costume Oscar had formerly worn, and advised him to return his fur coat with the black frogs to Nathan, the theatrical costumier, instead of desecrating Chelsea by dressing up as a blend of Kossuth and Mr. Mantalini. Oscar replied, an animated correspondence by letter and telegram ensued, both adversaries grew heated, and they never forgave each other. Whistler was definitely the aggressor.

Money was often scarce in the Tite Street household, and Mrs. Wilde had frequently to borrow small sums from a neighbour. Two sons were born to them, one in 1885 and one in 1886. It became essential that Oscar should secure a permanent source of income, and he entered into negotiations with the house of Cassell. In October 1887 he was appointed

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editor of a monthly magazine, *The Woman's World*, issued by this firm. According to his biographer and friend Sherard he enjoyed the work. He was very punctual at the office and went regularly by the underground railway from Sloane Square to Charing Cross, and from there he walked through Fleet Street. But to Henley, who asked him how often he went to the office, he answered, "I used to go three times a week, for an hour a day, but I have struck off one of the days." Was Oscar posing when he said this? He certainly liked to be taken for a greater idler than he was, and seemed to regard the display of activity as something unbecoming. Another member of Cassell's staff told Yeats's father that Wilde was "so indolent, but such a genius."

Whatever may have been the manner in which Oscar performed his duties, he took them seriously. He was able to secure contributions from such well-known people as Oscar Browning, Carmen Sylva, Olive Schreiner, Marie Corelli, Ouida, and Arthur Symons. He enjoyed a sense of power when paying them their fee of a guinea a page. And every month, under the title of "Some Literary Notes," he wrote a book article upon which he bestowed much care. At the same time he continued his anonymous journalism for the *World* and the *Pall Mall* and other publications. But he

conceived through this work and the contacts it imposed upon him a hearty dislike for journalism and journalists, and afterwards he never missed an opportunity to jibe at Fleet Street.

While thus engaged, Oscar kept reproaching himself for his indolence. "I am not doing what I ought to do," he often repeated. "I ought to be putting black upon white,—black upon white!" True, he also said that he was at his best when lying on a sofa, contemplating, and discovering delicate cadences that expressed exactly what he wanted to express. He had no wish to do anything else, he said, for he was prostrate after a page of composition. For an indolent man who had to perform so much drudgery, he was able to turn out a considerable amount of original writing. The first explanation of this apparent contradiction is to be sought in that strange factor, time. No doubt, our existence is a dream woven of brevities. But however flimsy, the material of life acquires in retrospect a semblance of substance. Bricklayers do build houses, though we notice their progress not from hour to hour but from month to month. It is fashionable nowadays to echo the popularisers of Einstein who have re-discovered the non-existence of time. But time performs things, or makes us perform them, in the long run. And by this token we know it for

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something that partakes of what we call existence.

And then, there is also the consideration that indolence is a vitalising factor. Your hustler, who works at fixed hours and with a show of febrile activity, must rest when the clock strikes the end of his virtuous day. He may, thereby, miss the best hours, the hours of inspiration for which the idler waits with patience and resignation. When they arrive, the idler is ready to seize them. Besides, it is the idler who is the leaven by which society has progressed, for better or for worse. He it is that invents labour-saving devices. It was an idler who joined with an axle two discs cut out of a tree-trunk and wheeled his burden instead of virtuously dragging it along.

The brief enumeration of Oscar's publications during the years between his marriage and his début as a successful playwright does not suggest literary sterility. In 1885 an essay was published in the *Nineteenth Century* which was eventually given the title of *The Truth of Masks*. In 1887 appeared short stories : *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime*, *The Canterville Ghost*, *The Sphinx without a Secret*, *The Model Millionaire*. In 1888 came *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* ; in 1889 *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*, and *Pen, Pencil and Poison* ; in 1890 *The Decay of Lying*, *The Critic as an Artist*, and *The Picture of Dorian*

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Gray, and in 1891 *A House of Pomegranates*, another book of short stories. In the same year essays already published periodically came out in a volume called *Intentions*, while the *Fortnightly* printed *The Soul of Man under Socialism*. *Salomé* also belongs to 1891. Not a bad achievement for an idler !

A critical appreciation of all these works does not come within the scope of this brief biography. But some aspects of Wilde's literary work must be pointed out. First and foremost, there is the matter of style. Whatever may be the merits or demerits of the content of his work, it cannot be gainsaid that the form is a sheer delight. At a period when fine writing was the main preoccupation of all men of letters who took literature seriously, Wilde was pre-eminent by his command of language and his love for it. Perfection of form was his steady aim, and to achieve it he spared no effort. Once, when he was staying in a country house, he told his host that he had spent the morning putting a comma into what he had written, and the afternoon taking it out again. The story was an affectation, but one based upon truth. Perfect smoothness of style can be achieved only by indefatigable labour. What is more, a "natural" style exists only when nature is constantly checked by conscious endeavour. Man's natural way of uttering him-

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self is either clumsy or rhetorical. When we speak of a style being natural we mean that it creates the impression of being natural. This it only does when it is laboured, provided the labour itself is hidden by art.

It has also been pointed out that Wilde's style was strongly influenced by contemporary French writing. This, of course, is all to the good. The best school of writing is that which lifts a man out of the prison of one language. It teaches him to think in the abstract, a very good way of preparing himself to come back to "reality." It makes him understand the great truth that language provides but a poor makeshift for the expression of the welter of thoughts and feelings within him. To Oscar Wilde, who had received from his mother an exaggerated notion of the phrase as being of value in itself, the transmutation of values that must accompany the dwelling of the mind within the frame of a foreign language was a wholesome discipline.

To conclude, we may state that Wilde's style would have impressed us as far more artificial had it been less laboured in its production, and that, if we can bring ourselves to overlook the excess of colour which was of the time as much as of the man, it was worthy of a master.

As regards the content of Wilde's work, its worth has been fantastically under-estimated

by the English. They have been blinded by the pose of his earlier years, and by the revelations concerning his personal life which were made at the time of his trial in 1895. They seem unable to regard him otherwise than as a *poseur* or a degenerate. As we shall see at a later stage, among his plays which even they cannot condemn altogether, they single out for praise the most artificial of the four. They are determined to deny him seriousness or depth.

Wilde's essays are rich in witty significance, the stories in dramatic power. *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime* is the work of a man who, sooner or later, must work for the stage. And in the fairy-tales we catch glimpses of a dreamy wonderland in which none but a child-soul could serve as our guide. For one of Oscar's many souls was that of a child.

V

SCARLET SIN FOR SUBURBIA

SUCCESS did not reward Oscar's work. The public refused to notice his prose writings. But at last a work of his appeared that could not be ignored. It was *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It was published in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in July 1890, and came out in book form in the course of the following year. It is the story of a young man who leads a wicked life but miraculously escapes the results of his debaucheries, while a portrait painted in his youth bears the burden of his "sins" and reveals to him the gradual degeneration of his soul. The main theme recalls Balzac's *Peau de Chagrin*, a novel in which the life of the hero is mysteriously connected with a piece of shagreen that shrinks each time he expresses a wish, till at last the skin and the hero's life fade away together. But there was a secondary theme which, from Wilde's point of view, was of greater importance. It was, first of all, a matter of the influence of one person upon another. Lord Henry Wotton meets the immature and beautiful Dorian Gray, and in the

course of a conversation, assisted by the loan of a book—Huysmans's *A Rebours*—converts him to the hedonism of Pater's *Renaissance*. Henceforth Dorian Gray goes through life in search of sensations, determined to enjoy each moment to the uttermost.

The development of this second theme is disappointing. The conversation between Lord Henry and Dorian, upon which hinges the whole course of the book, is never convincing. Wilde did the same thing infinitely better, a few years later, in one of his plays. The vapid patter by which Lord Henry persuades Dorian Gray to embark upon a lurid career of "sin" which eventually leads to crime could have called forth no response outside the dawning consciousness of a moron. But Dorian reacts to the stimulus with the obedience of a well-constructed automaton. Like the hero of *A Rebours*, he sets out at once in search of the "exquisite passion," the "stirring of the senses," the "strange dyes, strange colours and curious odours" which, to the disciple of Pater, distinguished life from mere existence.

It cannot be denied, however, that Dorian's quest is finely described, in language that charms the ear and gives one the sense of ease one experiences in the presence of a beautiful and empty-minded woman with whom one is not forced to live.

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Lord Henry, the experimenter, the vicarious enjoyer of life, and Dorian Gray, who drains the cup of sensation, are two aspects of Oscar, who, in this book, reveals himself more fully than in any of his other works.

The Picture of Dorian Gray is strangely immature. It has about it something pathetically adolescent. It is full of reveries that would be daring were they not so vague. Unnamed infamies hover through its pages. Appetites and lusts are hinted at, but remain unspecified. Again and again, Oscar's obsession with sin comes bobbing up. It was an obsession prevalent in the 'nineties, though it appears nowhere with the same awkward insistence as in the work of Wilde. Nowadays we prefer to talk of "vice" rather than of "sin," and that is the only difference. There is a conversation I have heard a dozen times, in Chelsea, in Bloomsbury, in St. John's Wood, in Hampstead, in Montparnasse :

He : " You don't mean to say you don't smoke ? "

She (*languidly*) : " Dear me, no. To be modern a woman must smoke, and a man must not. Shall we say that I am . . . beyond modernity ? "

He : " But you won't touch gin either ! And you haven't lifted your sherry from the table this half-hour. What a model wife you

must be ! Tell me, have you no vices at all, then ? ”

She (*with the smile of the sphinx without a secret*) :
 “ Ah ! . . . But I mustn’t reveal them at our first meeting.”

In any case, Oscar’s conception of sin was somewhat catholic. Wainwright’s mania for poisoning was quaintly described by him as “ this strange sin.” He did, however, establish a distinction between crime and sin. Crime, apparently, was sin without splendour. “ Crime in England,” he wrote in *Pen, Pencil and Poison*, “ is rarely the result of sin. It is nearly always the result of starvation.” And, if he was an adolescent in his preoccupation with sin, Oscar could nevertheless think more clearly about it than usually appeared. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* he wrote : “ The body sins once, and has done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification. Nothing remains then but the recollection of a pleasure, or the luxury of a regret. The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful. It has been said that the great events of the world take place in the brain. It is in the brain, and the brain only, that the great sins of the world take place also.”

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This, of course, is a doctrine which would not startle our age, familiarised as it has become with the idea that repression is usually harmful. But to the post-puritanical 'nineties, which preserved their worship of prohibitions while abandoning the religious justification of prohibitions, Wilde's doctrine possessed all the horrible implications of unspeakable truth.

All that was adolescent, all that was dwarfed, distorted and respectable in the England of 1890 and 1891 proclaimed its indignation. The *St. James's Gazette* spoke of "esoteric prurience" and declared that it would refrain from analysing the book in order "not to offend the nostrils of decent persons." "Stupid . . . vulgar . . . cheap research among the garbage of the French *décadents* . . . voluptuousness always leads up to blood-shedding . . . a very lame story . . . disgusting . . . malodorous putrefaction . . . odious . . . mischievous . . . ought to be chucked into the fire . . . silly catchpenny revelations of the non-existent." These are the high-lights in this first review of the book. The *Daily Chronicle* called it "a tale spawned from the leprous literature of the French *décadents*, a poisonous book, the atmosphere of which is heavy with the mephitic odours of moral and spiritual putrefaction." "In conclusion," the *Chronicle* stated, "this book is a sham, except the one element in the book

which will taint every young mind that comes in contact with it." The *Scots Observer* declared the story fit only "for the Criminal Investigation Department or a hearing in camera." Reviews of a similar trend, though not so violent in expression, appeared in several other papers.

Echoes of this outcry could be heard reverberating well into the present century. I remember in particular a man who, in 1916, discovered on my shelf a translation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He was thin, nervous, and full of principles. "If I had a son," he said, "I would die rather than allow him to read this book. It has had a dreadful influence upon me. It revealed things to me of which I was unaware; it has taken me years to overcome its evil effects." The man quivered as he spoke. He was patently sincere. I have often thought of him, and I have wondered whether his case did not prove that Wilde's book was indeed nefarious. It has, at any rate, made me more kindly disposed towards the critics. It would appear that, among the English, there are people endowed with a second sight for the detection of evil. The passages of *Dorian Gray* that refer to wickedness are childish because of their indirectness, their vagueness and their want of sense. But while the adult mind wonders at them, and judges

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them immature, the mind of the immature may be unsettled by them, just as it would be by reading the cynical marriage liturgy of the Church of England. Oscar Wilde was aware of this danger. In the preface he wrote in reply to his detractors when the novel appeared in book form, he declared : " The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography." He also said : " It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors." The reader who was upset was a person whose morals were already in danger. As it happened, the morals of most men in the England of the 'nineties were in danger.

But there is one curious thing about the history of the book. Notwithstanding all the critics wrote, it failed to become a best-seller. In this respect, at any rate, the times have changed.

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VI

WEAVER OF SPELLS

WHILE struggling for public recognition as an artist, Oscar had only achieved notoriety. But meanwhile he had established a well-deserved reputation as a talker and a wit. I have already referred to his conversational powers and to the fact that they were not universally relished. I have also mentioned his personal charm. There is, however, a startling divergence of opinions on these subjects. From the contradictory declarations of those who came in contact with him we must conclude that his performance was not always on the same level. He must, as is only natural, have had his good and his bad days. Like every temperamental performer, he was easily influenced by the response and the appreciation with which he met. We know, indeed, that he could be ruthless, when stung to the quick. He could be studiously uninteresting when he considered that to be otherwise would have meant casting his pearls before swine. Beneath his flippancy there was a real desire to be liked as well as appreciated, and he shrank

back into his shell if the atmosphere was uncongenial.

Outward appearance is an important factor of success for a man who practises one of the arts that are intimately connected with the personality. In this respect Oscar was rather handicapped. His face was interesting ; its fascination was certainly not that of beauty. His hair was long, elaborately waved, and parted in the middle. It was brown, but in the 'nineties it had grown dull. He had aged beyond his years, and at thirty-five or so he looked distinctly middle-aged. His eyes were grey, and seemed lazy and kind beneath their heavy lids. His nose was fine, his lips were dark coloured, his teeth uneven. One of the front teeth was black. His skin was brown and coarse. His head was well shaped, but the flesh of the face had sagged, the mouth and chin were full, and the cheeks touched his wide wing collar. He was tall, broad and thickset. His hands were fat and seemed ineffectual. A large scarab ring unwisely drew attention to them. "There was something florid, almost vulgar, in his appearance," says Rothenstein. "His appearance was not in his favour ; there was something oily and fat about him that repelled me," says Frank Harris. A woman who met him for the first time wrote in her diary that there was "a look of well-being" in his

body that was too well tended and looked "like a well-kept garden." "*Bien-être*," said another woman, "expands from Oscar's irradiated corpulence." He liked to array himself in bright colours. One visitor noted that he received her wearing a lilac shirt, a heliotrope tie, and a great primrose-coloured carnation.

Oscar's looks may have affected new acquaintances uncomfortably. But once interest infused him with life he soon made them forget their first impression. His eyes flashed with intelligence, his face brightened with humour, and a smile of self-irony played about his mouth. The most remarkable thing was the immediate effect he exercised upon those who were about him when the spirit moved him. It has been admirably described by Katherine Bradley, one of the two women who collaborated under the name of Michael Field, the poet. She speaks of "the comfort he conveys to the brain. All that a woman does to a man by her presence on the hearth or by the tea-table," she continues, "he does to the brain—neither lulling it nor stimulating it—introducing about it a climate of happiness, so that it is twice itself, freed from depression of fragility or chill. . . ." "He was always genial . . . an amiable and sunny spirit," says E. F. Benson, and Charles Ricketts tells us that he was "the kindest and sunniest nature" he ever met.

“He gave one the impression,” says Henri de Régnier, “that he was a happy man, at ease in life.” “One listened to him enthralled,” says Lord Alfred Douglas.

Can we probe into the essence of the talk that had such an effect upon other people? Good talk is a gift of personality. As is the case with acting and with singing, it passes with the personality. We are able, nowadays, to make a record of a singer's voice. We can at any time ask our gramophone to recapture for us the soulless perfection of Caruso's song or the husky weirdness of that of Conchita Supervia. Even the actor and the orator can perpetuate their art. But conversation is beyond recall. We can only, now, listen to those who have heard Oscar talk, or read their recollections. And there is only one way of forming a conclusion based upon their oft-conflicting views: we must establish distinctions. It would have amused Oscar to know that one day an attempt would be made to classify his talk under three headings. And yet, enamoured as he was of the unspontaneous, he might have admitted with a smile that he never forgot to behave according to circumstance. Let us then distinguish between his private conversation, his talk to outsiders, and his talk in a circle where he felt at ease.

There is certainly no truth in the allegation

that this talker was unable to converse. When he was alone with a person he liked he could listen—the most difficult part of conversation—and he could answer, discuss, collaborate. He could pass from subject to subject, allow matters to be introduced that interested the other person more than himself, and make all the little sacrifices upon which human intercourse must be built. He could inspire the other with satisfaction both with Oscar and with himself. Sometimes he would soliloquise, if he noticed a readiness to listen. But there was no attempt to capture a monopoly.

When he was in company, Oscar began by listening. He took the measure of those present. Sometimes he remained silent, and his face became like a threatening mask. At other times he made a dive, and launched out, suddenly and ruthlessly. Then he put on his *masque de parade*, as André Gide calls it. He tried to astonish, to amuse, to exasperate. He refused to listen, to take any notice of what was not within the line of his vision. If there were resistances, if he were not allowed to shine by himself, he simply faded out. Those who met him in such moods kept unpleasant memories of him.

It was, however, when he felt that he was among people who appreciated and expected a display of his art that he was at his best.

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But even in a congenial circle, his manner was not always the same. If many were present, especially if strangers had been introduced, his talk assumed a certain formality. He would tell stories and fire off aphorisms that had been prepared beforehand. He had no self-consciousness on such occasions. Part of the company might have heard the same story before, but he would give it again for the benefit of the majority. His supreme quality came out only when some three or four friends gathered round a table. Then he let himself go he knew not whither.

The first ingredient of his talk was, of course, his perfect voice. It was flexible and incredibly full of nuance. It penetrated, it sang, it lingered. Then it would fall and become almost a murmur. Somebody has compared its softness to that of moss. It never ceased to please. In short, it was an Irish voice. To certain words he gave a slow caress. He pronounced "*mar-joram*," "*am-ber*," "*nar-cissus*," "*crim-son*." "It should be our faith," he used to say, "that everything in this world can be expressed in words." Sometimes he had intonations that conveyed as much as and more than the words he used. Then there was his gesticulation, which was stately, but un-English. There was a preciousness, an affectation, in the wave of his hands.

His talk was seasoned with inverted and distorted proverbs, and with paradox. "Nothing succeeds like excess"—it was an easy trick, but one that never failed to amuse. And his paradoxes and aphorisms were not shallow. "I still recall perfect sayings of his, as perfect as on the day when he said them," declares Rothenstein. His talk was based upon an acute appreciation of human character and an extensive acquaintance with old and current literature. To young Rothenstein he seemed to have read everything. Ricketts, however, found unexpected gaps in his reading. And Oscar was not afraid of tackling subjects of which he was ignorant. He trusted to his verve and his coolness to carry him through. He betrayed himself upon occasion, nevertheless. He was utterly devoid of musical sense, and almost unable to distinguish one tune from another. But like the "aesthetes" of the 'seventies, he considered that every form of art was the artist's domain, and he was not afraid of airing his views about music. He once heard a critic speak of "the deferred resolutions of Chopin." The phrase caught his fancy, and he began to talk about "the deferred resolutions of Beethoven." When he spoke of the "passionate, curiously coloured fantasies" of Dvořák, he made, perhaps, a luckier guess.

Oscar was not only a talker, he was a

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raconteur. Stories and apologues poured from him in profusion: his inventiveness rarely dried up. But to tell story after story one must feel a certain confidence in one's audience. He did not lack it, especially among his friends. This is perhaps why it was among them that his art reached its highest perfection. The stories were the best part of his talk. He established no clear distinction between his talk and his literary work. It is perhaps not right to say that his conversation was a preparation for his writing, for to him it was an end in itself. It would be truer to say that his writing naturally proceeded from his talk. Slow in his literary composition, he counted the hours that were given to talk as part of the process of writing.

An allusion, a word, would suddenly call forth a story. "I must tell you this fantasy of mine," he would exclaim, and then came one of those simple child-like tales in language inspired by the Bible, of which he was a constant reader. If it pleased his hearers and himself, he would produce it again, upon a more formal occasion, until after long incubation and occasional airing it seemed worthy of transcription. Not infrequently the earlier version was superior to the final form, which suffered from over-elaboration. *The Birthday of the Infanta*, for instance, began as a tale of a hundred words.

He sometimes forgot that the talk was the thing, and then only the author remained, seeking for the collaboration of his hearers, testing a plot upon one person after another till at last he had discovered what seemed to him the perfect form. He enjoyed his witticisms as much as anybody, and he had a way of laughing aloud before they came. One of his friends says that this gave the key to the mood in which the epigram or the story was to be interpreted. At the same time his hearers were also conscious of his real desire to please. They never felt as though he merely used them for an experiment. And sometimes, with a look or a gesture, he compensated as it were for the absurdity or the exaggeration of what he was saying.

A specimen of a story in its barest outline has been preserved for us by André Gide. "When Narcissus died, the flowers of the field moaned and they asked the river to give them drops of water that they might weep.—Oh ! answered the river, if all my drops were tears, I should not have enough to weep for Narcissus. I loved him.—Oh ! answered the flowers of the field, how could you have failed to love Narcissus ? He was beautiful.—Was he beautiful ? asked the river.—And who should know better than you ? Every day he bent over your bank, and mirrored his beauty in your waters."

There was a pause. He would use such pauses to enhance his effect, knowing full well that no one would have the audacity to break the silence. Then, "If I loved him, said the river, it was because, when he bent over my waters, I saw the reflection of my waters in his eyes."

In his talk, Oscar never dwelt upon unpleasant or painful subjects. He was never coarse. He always observed a ceremonious formality that recalled Disraeli, who, like himself, began as an aesthete and remained a dandy.

The one purely English element in Oscar's talk was his masterly handling of nonsense. Without so much as a smile, he poured out statements worthy of Lewis Carroll or of Lear. Nonsense was, in his opinion, the one suitable way of treating that major absurdity, life. Once he announced that he was busy writing a little tract, number one in "The People's Cheap Guinea Series of Great Thoughts," which would be entitled "The Value of Presence of Mind." The Bishop of London, he said, had kindly consented to write a preface. This was produced as the only explanation of his arriving late for lunch. E. F. Benson gives us a perfect example of his nonsense conversation. Oscar had been told to take down to dinner an earnest lady novelist who hated

flippancy. As they walked downstairs she made her gambit :

"What terrible weather we are having."

"Yes, but if it wasn't for the snow," answered Oscar with a solemn face, "how could we believe in the immortality of the soul?"

"What an interesting question, Mr. Wilde," said she. "But tell me exactly what you mean."

"I haven't the slightest idea," replied Oscar.

The French actor Coquelin Cadet one day asked Oscar to call on him at nine o'clock the next morning. Wilde looked at him with admiration. "My dear M. Coquelin, you are really a remarkable man. I am much more bourgeois than you. I am always in bed by four or five. I could never stay awake as late as that! Really, you *are* a remarkable man!" Coquelin did not understand.

Finally, there was in Oscar's talk a conscious, but not altogether deliberate, element which added to its quality. It was the artistry of form. The dialogues published in *Intentions* give us an idea of the perfection of form after which he strove. But even there we lack the life that was present only with Oscar himself. Two witnesses of many of his best talks have attempted the almost impossible task of formulating his recipe. Ricketts puts it this way : "The poet we divine in his early verses re-

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mained ever present and spontaneous in his speech. There was, besides, the cadenced and varied intonation, pausing on a word, a sentence, as a violinist accents and phrases his music." W. B. Yeats says: "I never before heard a man talking with perfect sentences, as if he had written them all over night with labour and yet all spontaneous. . . . I noticed that the impression of artificiality that I think all Wilde's listeners have recorded came from the perfect rounding of the sentences and from the deliberation that made it possible. That very impression helped him, as the effect of metre, or of the antithetical prose of the seventeenth century, which is itself a true metre, helped its writers, for he could pass without incongruity from some unforeseen, swift stroke of wit to elaborate reverie."

Oscar Wilde has given us his own ideal of the artistic monologue in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, when he describes how Lord Henry Wotton develops at a lunch-party the paradoxical idea that "nowadays most people die of a sort of creeping common sense, and discover when it is too late that the only things one never regrets are one's mistakes."

"He played with the idea, and grew wilful ; tossed it into the air and transformed it ; let it escape and recaptured it ; made it iridescent with fancy, and winged it with paradox. The

praise of folly, as he went on, soared into a philosophy, and Philosophy herself became young, and catching the mad music of Pleasure, wearing, one might fancy, her wine-stained robe and wreath of ivy, danced like a Bacchante over the hills of life, and mocked the slow Silenus for being sober. Facts fled before her like frightened forest things. Her white feet trod the huge press at which wise Omar sits, till the seething grape-juice rose round her bare limbs in waves of purple bubbles, or crawled in red foam over the vat's black, dripping, sloping sides. It was an extraordinary improvisation. . . . He was brilliant, fantastic, irresponsible. He charmed his listeners out of themselves, and they followed his pipe laughing."

And this is how a discriminating listener remembers Oscar's actual performance :

It was no wonder that his brilliance should dazzle and intoxicate himself as well as his listeners. It soared and sparkled, . . . it passed into shadow and grew serious, and then its gravity cleared again as some bomb of absurdity exploded in the middle of it ; and so ingenious was he that he could, when challenged, defend the most outrageous of his paradoxes. Like Vivian in his *Decay of Lying*, he was prepared to prove anything. He loved a string of jewelled phrases in his spoken word as well as in his writing, and if possibly they sometimes sounded like

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a recollection of Walter Pater, as perhaps they were, who cared so long as the Pied Piper continued to flute? How like was his talk to the play of a sunlit fountain! It rose in the air constantly changing its shape, but always with the hue of the rainbow on it, and almost before you could realise the outline of this jet or that, it had vanished and another sparkled where it had been, so that you could hardly remember even the moment afterwards, what exactly it was that had enchanted you. (E. F. Benson in *As We Were*.)

This, then, was Oscar the talker and the charmer, and at moments when he dominated a dinner-table or a party he lived as he rarely lived at other times. Kindness, instinct, deliberate art combined in the performance into which, more than into any other part of his life, he put his genius. But there were occasions when he could show his claws and use them. He never suffered fools gladly. And when a man set out deliberately to hurt him or wilfully defended the prejudices against which Oscar waged incessant war, the smile disappeared and he could be cruel. Sometimes the victim was not even conscious of chastisement. This happened to Frank Harris, the Welsh adventurer and man of letters. Wilde's social genius and his humour fascinated Harris, who tried to emulate him. Harris could talk, and possessed a vivacity that

made him interesting. But one day, at the Café Royal, he tried to play the part of the artistic *causeur*. Wilde, Max Beerbohm, Aubrey Beardsley, Rothenstein, and Robert Ross were Harris's guests. He began by telling a lengthy story that was a mere paraphrase of one of the tales in Anatole France's *Etui de Nacre*. "What a charming story, Frank," remarked Oscar when the end was reached at last. And then, after a pause: "Anatole France would have spoiled that story." But Harris did not see the irony. He continued to hold forth and began to enumerate the houses of the wealthy he had visited. Suddenly Oscar lashed out. "Yes, dear Frank, we believe you. You have dined in every house in London—once."

VII

TRIUMPH

UNEXPECTEDLY, in the year 1892, the portals of Fairyland opened wide. Oscar walked in with the effortless, springy step that belongs to dreams, and, to his amazement, found recognition, success, applause, money. Out of the abundance of his fancy and his verbal facility he had brought forth *Lady Windermere's Fan*, "one of those modern drawing-room plays with pink shades," he said with a self-deprecating smile. He did not take this dramatic effort very seriously. But when George Alexander produced it at the St. James's Theatre on February 20th, though society was hardly represented, Bohemia and the arts thronged the house in eager expectation. It had been whispered by those who knew that the play would be good. Had not the *Athenæum* recently broken a tradition of years and praised a work of his, *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories*? The literary world had come to realise that for all his lack of seriousness Oscar was a serious

artist. And before the end of the first act the audience knew that its evening would not be wasted.

Each curtain was the signal for rapturous applause. At the end of the fourth act the enthusiasm was such that there could be no doubt as to the success of the play. When the public called for the author, Oscar appeared from the wings, and forgetting his volubility and the half-smoked cigarette in his hand, uttered a few gauche words: "I am so pleased you enjoyed yourselves; I can say that I enjoyed myself very much." The press judged the incident severely. Oscar had "lounged in front of the footlights without taking the trouble to fling aside his half-smoked cigarette," and proceeded, said the *Daily Telegraph*, "to compliment the audience on its good sense in liking what he himself had condescended to admire." *Truth* said that "his last move in calm effrontery" was "deliberately planned and gratuitously offensive." The criticism of the play itself was equally hostile. But *Lady Windermere's Fan* continued to be performed night after night before full houses. And the public asked for more. In April of the following year Beerbohm Tree produced *A Woman of No Importance* at the Haymarket, and in January 1895 *An Ideal Husband*. Less than six weeks later George Alexander produced *The Importance*

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of *Being Earnest* at the St. James's, and the two plays ran concurrently.

Lady Windermere's Fan and its successors arrived at the right moment. Oscar was in no way in the van of a new movement. On the contrary, he represented something that was disappearing. But his work was the best of its kind, and, as often happens when the public is staggered by the advent of novelty, there was a quick compromise between the old and the new, and the old, dressed in new clothes, was recognised by the genuine conservatives and hailed by those who imagined that they possessed a taste for the new. By the early 'nineties the country had outgrown Victorianism, though the Queen who gave her name to this queer philosophy of life had still some ten years to reign. The 'nineties were a period of intense mental and artistic alertness. They, and not the world war, witnessed the birth of the new freedom and the new frankness that are ours. Oscar had imposed himself upon the attention of the public during the late 'seventies and the 'eighties, a period both desolate and ugly. And now, in the 'nineties, he was already in many respects a voice from the past. He was no born leader, because a leader can forget himself and allow himself to be carried by the movement he is supposed to lead. In the 'nineties he was

but a last brilliant flash of a manner that was dying. Aestheticism was not then as fashionable as we imagine.

The English drama was in the throes of a new birth. For generations the only function of the stage had been to provide entertainment and the occasion for a little gentle emotion. Then came the Scotsman William Archer, the Irishman Bernard Shaw, and the Dutchman J. T. Grein, who revealed Ibsen to the English. In 1889 *A Doll's House* was produced, in 1891 *Ghosts* and *Hedda Gabler*. The people who came to see these plays were asked to look at life and think about it, a very novel occupation for theatre-goers. Of course, the press protested, and the *Daily Telegraph* wrote of Ibsen's *Ghosts* as though it had been *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It was called a loathsome sore unbandaged, an open drain, a dirty act done publicly. But interest in Ibsen was not killed, and more of his plays were performed. And Bernard Shaw began to write plays, not indeed in imitation of Ibsen, but inspired by the same intention of stimulating thought about life.

Precisely at this moment, Oscar offered his first comedy of modern life to the English. Once more, they were given the laugh and the tear they adored. But they were given these things in a new and highly competent form. The mass of playgoers, who were not ripe for

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the drama of ideas, took with enthusiasm to this novel traditionalism. And *Lady Windermere's Fan* richly deserved its success. The author understood human nature. He displayed creatures of flesh and blood struggling with the taboos and limitations placed upon human nature by Victorian imbecility. The conversation was brilliant: creatures with souls of their own spoke through the mouth of Oscar Wilde, the *causeur* at his very best. There were, indeed, moments of profound psychological sagacity, such as that when Mrs. Erlynne, the woman with a past, persuades Lady Windermere (who is her daughter without knowing it) to return to husband and child after she had decided to leave them. But there was no trace of spurious straining after effect, of the facile epigram launched for its own sake. "You—why, you are a mere girl, you would be lost. You haven't the kind of brain that enables a woman to get back. You have neither the wit nor the courage." Mrs. Erlynne does not speak to her daughter of the courage required to leave her present existence, but, bridging half a lifetime, she sees before her the struggle required to return to it. There is, indeed, a moment when one wonders how Wilde is going to cope with the problem he has set himself. And he solves it, not by mechanical brilliancy, not by clever play with

words, but by sheer human understanding. He also displays an uncanny capacity for inventing the significant incident that helps the unfolding of the story. At the same time the play is full of those unexpected sayings the public had learned to expect from him.

A Woman of No Importance seems to me the least able of the four plays. Just here and there it has the melodramatic touch of *The Duchess of Padua*. But even in such places the melodrama is less impossible, less artificial, and it is not insincere. It is merely that the assumptions from which Wilde starts are bound to strain one's credulity. In this play the cherished character of the artistic sceptic, the heartless talker, the experimenter with life, Lord Henry of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, reappears. There is almost a repetition of the famous scene in which Lord Henry Wotton reveals his version of the secret of life to young Dorian Gray, when Lord Illingworth primes his illegitimate son Gerald Arbuthnot before launching him into a career. "Remember that you've got on your side the most wonderful thing in the world—youth! There is nothing like youth. The middle-aged are mortgaged to Life. The old are in Life's lumber-room. But youth is the Lord of Life." And Lord Illingworth is possessed of infinitely more reality than Lord Henry. He is plausible, and no longer placed

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above causality and circumstance. Nor is he handled as a force of nature that can only be accepted, not criticised. He is utterly defeated, and the gallery is not invited to worship him.

In *An Ideal Husband* Oscar comes into his own once more. There is a charming sayer of beautiful things, Lord Goring, "the flawless dandy" who "plays with life," "is on perfectly good terms with the world," and "is fond of being misunderstood" because "it gives him a point of advantage." But he is also a kind of providence who settles all troubles by quick brain-work and utter detachment. We are given another of those perfect scenes in which brain is pitted against brain, and the wider understanding and the purest goodwill fight against instinct and win the day. Lady Chiltern has persuaded her husband to renounce his political career because she has found out that the origin of it was a successful immoral action. Lord Goring makes her change her mind, by pointing out that she is playing the game of Mrs. Cheveley, the blackmailer. "Women are not meant to be judges, but to forgive us when we need forgiveness. Pardon, not punishment, is their mission."

The Importance of Being Earnest is a divertisement rather than a play. Improbabilities are heaped sky-high, and the atmosphere is as artificial as in *Twelfth Night* or *The Comedy of*

Errors. The characters are soulless puppets. Yet, once the initial absurdity has been accepted, the play is charming and even fascinating. The puppets perform flawlessly. There is a dry, metallic precision about the action. And before the curtain falls for the last time everybody is happy for ever after. It may be true, as is usually said, that of the four comedies this one is the best. But it has not a spark of humanity in it, and from the point of view of a revelation of the purely human possibilities in Oscar Wilde it is a definite regression. The wider sympathy of the previous plays has completely dried up. Had it disappeared for ever, or had Oscar merely written the play in order to satisfy the insatiable demand of the theatre-going public? We shall never know, for he wrote no more for the stage. Life had gone on while he wrote, and it suddenly assumed a reality that towered above the artificialities of words and puppets.

VIII

THE BOY IN THE TUCKSHOP

CONSTANCE WILDE need no longer borrow money from her neighbour. But relief from financial worry did not bring happiness to the house in Tite Street. With the thousands he began to earn—in 1894 his income was £8000—Oscar was able to give his wife as many picturesque frocks as she might desire. Of his company and friendship she was given less and less. Fame made him lose his head, affluence completely demoralised him. Both had come as a staggering surprise. Luxury had been a dream, its worship a fundamental tenet in his philosophy. Now it was his, and he threw himself upon it, determined to enjoy it to the full.

Luxury, to Oscar, meant first of all display. It meant cabs from morning till night, instead of the occasional hailing of a passing hansom. It meant buttonholes of flowers rare and out of season, instead of the modest carnation. Every morning he hired a cab for the day. He began by being driven to the Burlington Arcade, where he bought a buttonhole at half a guinea for himself and one at half a crown for the

“Not happiness!” he said, “pleasure! One must always make for what is most tragic.” Sayings like this show that there was self-searching at the bottom of his new affectation. But he stifled it. He lived the life of his own creation, Dorian Gray. Life again imitated art. But in his case the effects of his indulgence were written large upon his features that were endowed with no magic immunity. Rothenstein saw him and wondered “whether he knew how gross, how soiled by the world, he appeared.” His admirer Robert Sherard, who met him again at the beginning of 1895, says that “he looked bloated, his face seemed to have lost its spiritual beauty, and was oozing with material prosperity. And,” he adds, “his conversation also was not agreeable.”

London looked at this compound of Roman Emperor and profiteer and did not approve. Even the rich, who received him because he was fashionable, did not like him. More and more, he was regarded as the embodiment of decadence and as the propagandist of moral dissolution. Long before his private life became the subject of rumours that gathered precision as time went on, his name was linked with vague notions of depravity, and people began to believe that the accusations levelled against the author of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* had a foundation in fact. *Salomé*, a work that

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was published in 1893, was perhaps the main cause of the distrust he inspired. But, strangely enough, the conviction that this play stood for the height of perversion was created far more by Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations than by the text. Beardsley, the *enfant terrible* of the decade, was fascinated by vice, and this consumptive youth of talent revelled in the contemplation of sex in all its manifestations and deviations. Nowadays his interpreters lay stress on the sense of *ennui*, on the cynical indifference revealed throughout his immature eroticism. We know that the sinner and the saint occupy contiguous cribs in the world's hospital for misfits, but it does not follow that they should be identified. It may be true that to Beardsley sin and its punishment were revealed in one vision. But the spectacle of sin did not make him wince. And in illustrating *Salomé* he fastened on sin, on lust, on strange passions, gave them a sharp outline, isolated them, and made them stand out in relief. His drawings were not illustrations, they were a fevered personal interpretation.

Wilde admitted the merit of Beardsley's illustrations, though he considered them too Japanese. But he disliked them intensely. "Dear Aubrey's designs are like the naughty scribbles a precocious schoolboy makes on the margins of his copy books," he said. He knew that they were unfaithful to his own intention.

There was nothing orgiastic about his conception of *Salomé*. It was a bas-relief, a heraldic design, a stately conventionalised recitative. On the whole continent of Europe *Salomé* is recognised as a great work of art, as an exquisite poem in exquisite prose. Oscar wrote it in French. He knew French very well, though we cannot say how well he spoke it. His English contemporaries say that he pronounced French atrociously and spoke it incorrectly. Frenchmen say that he spoke it almost perfectly. His French was certainly one of the most original things about him. He took the same liberties with accentuation and stress as he took in English. He pronounced *skepticisme*, because he did not like the sound of *scepticisme*. And he was ready to hold forth in French whenever the opportunity arose. Some time in 1891 he wrote *Salomé*, and the original text was revised by several Frenchmen. We do not know how much of it was changed, but according to Wilde's friend and literary executor Robert Ross the corrections were few. As it now stands the French is never ungrammatical. But there are sentences which a Frenchman might prefer not to have written. "Où est celui dont la coupe d'abominations est déjà pleine?" . . . "Peut-être je vous ai trop aimée." . . . And yet, these sentences are not incorrect. They are only not classical.

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There are also, in *Salomé*, poetic gems, such as the passage in Herod's speech describing the peacocks, which equal the best of Oscar's English prose : " *Salomé, vous connaissez mes paons blancs, mes beaux paons blancs, qui se promènent dans le jardin entre les myrtes et les grands cyprès. Leurs becs sont dorés, et les grains qu'ils mangent sont dorés aussi, et leurs pieds sont teints de pourpre. La pluie vient quand ils crient, et quand ils se pavanent la lune se montre au ciel. Ils vont deux à deux entre les cyprès et les myrtes noirs et chacun a son esclave pour le soigner. Quelquefois ils volent à travers les arbres, et quelquefois ils couchent sur le gazon et autour de l'étang.*"

Another event which was now being remembered against Oscar was the publication, in 1889, by *Blackwood's Magazine*, of *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* Half seriously, Wilde tried to prove in this story that Shakespeare's sonnets were addressed to one Will Hughes, a boy actor with whom he was in love. It was ingenious but unpardonable. Shakespeare wrote in a language that is imperfectly understood. In England one must therefore either profoundly revere him or deny his existence. I once read a book in which the accusation of unusual sexual tendencies made against Shakespeare is dismissed with the simple re-

mark that he was a great poet and therefore too noble to be guilty of this offence.

In 1894 a book appeared which did incalculable harm to Oscar Wilde. The author, Robert Hichens, had spent some time in Egypt in the company of several friends of Oscar. He listened to their conversations, and when he was back in England he wrote a cunning, amusing, but very malicious satire of Oscar. He represented him as Esmé Amarinth, a *poseur* whose affectation goes to the length of wearing carnations painted green. Esmé has a young disciple who apes him, and together they teach choir-boys to sing to the tune of *Three Blind Mice* a catch in praise of "rose white youth, passionate pale." *The Green Carnation* was an instant success. Unlike *Patience*, it was not a good-humoured skit, it was an attack. And it came at a time when people were ready to believe anything that could be said against Oscar. He began to find that he was no longer welcome in many houses where he had formerly been received.

One evening Robert Ross took him with a small party to the Hogarth Club. As they entered a room, a member stared at Oscar, rose from his chair, and walked towards the door. Other members followed his example. Oscar took in the situation at a glance. He moved towards the member who had given

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the signal for the exodus, and said to him in a loud voice : " How dare you insult a member of your own club ! I am Mr. Ross's guest, an insult to me is an insult to him. I insist upon your apologising to Mr. Ross." The member lost his countenance, muttered something to the effect that no insult had been intended, and returned to his seat. So did the others. Rothenstein, who relates this incident, considers that Oscar showed great pluck. He did, and he also proved that a large presence and a loud voice are useful assets in dealing with the herd instinct. He further showed that he had a complete disregard for club etiquette. But gestures such as this might cow the critics for a moment. They did not stifle rumour.

And rumour was growing. There was one other element upon which it could feed : the accusations so insistently brought against Oscar Wilde happened to be true.

IX

DIFFERENT

LONG before the end of his triumphal career, half London knew that Oscar Wilde was homosexual. It has been argued that when he committed the acts for which he was eventually punished by the law of England he was temporarily out of his mind. The definite declarations made by him on more than one occasion, once at least upon his oath, that he had never infringed the law by forbidden sexual acts, are mentioned in support of this theory. He forgot what he had done as soon as the fit of madness left him, we are told. We have learned to think more clearly about these matters, and to us, nowadays, that theory seems absurd.

It has also been said that Oscar Wilde was corrupted by a very young man whose acquaintance he made in the days of his success as a dramatist. This view cannot be brushed aside with the impatience it deserves. It affects a man who is still alive. To show its absurdity we must necessarily go more deeply into the question. I shall try to show that Oscar

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Wilde's sexual psychology did not result from a sudden deviation due to insanity, and that it was not a chance development in middle age, but that it was part and parcel of his personality.

Before we ask ourselves what determined Wilde's sexual life, I wish to indicate as clearly as possible my own attitude in this matter. After all, I am writing in England for Anglo-Saxon readers. Let me state, therefore, that I write neither as an apologist nor as a reformer. To my mind, there are only two sane attitudes in matters of sex. The first is that which takes the Old Testament's "increase and multiply" for its motto. It admits of any form of sexual intercourse that may lead to the propagation of the human race. With the proviso that this intercourse must first be sanctioned by ecclesiastical blessing, this is the doctrine of the church of Rome. The other attitude is founded upon the view that all forms and aspects of sexuality are the private concern of the individual. Both attitudes can be justified. The first is based upon the fact that the human race exists irrespective of the human individual, the eugenicist, and the moralist, and transcends them all. The second is based upon the fact that to the human mind there can be no higher value, no better criterion of truth than the human individual. These two facts may be contradictory and ex-

clusive of one another. But this does not mean that they cannot co-exist. The human mind has a pathetic craving for absolutes, and overlooks the simple, practical fact that all absolutes are relative. Our practical philosophies oscillate between the recognition of these two absolutes, the racial and the individual, because we persist in believing that contradictions in our universe are only apparent and are due to a lack of understanding on our part. The time may come when men will recognise and accept contradiction and incompatibility. Then they will write "the end" under the book of metaphysics, which contains the story of the maddest vagaries of the human mind. But I doubt whether the book will close while men exist, and error, which is their sister.

While prepared to accept both absolutes in the abstract, I support in practice the ethics based upon the recognition of the absolute value of the human individual. At the same time I admit that society, which has rights that may differ from those of the individual, should enforce those rights, in sexual matters, in two circumstances. Human beings to whom harm can be done—the young and the unwilling—must be protected, and public opinion, whether right or wrong, must not be *openly* flouted.

To understand what happened to Oscar Wilde, we must realise an elementary psycho-

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logical truth. It is that homosexuality is not a wicked lapse on the part of unfortunate and exceptional individuals, but a stage through which every human being passes at one time of his development. Some individuals remain stationary at this stage, others grow out of it. Let me try to explain. Those irrelevant and rather ridiculous protuberances on the chest of the human male, the nipples, are witnesses of the bisexual nature which was his at one stage of his embryonic development. Women also possess traces of their embryonic past. And in their psychological make-up all human beings retain traces of the sex which physiological accident decided should not be theirs. In their early post-natal development, they pass through obscure stages when each of them possesses numerous characteristics of both sexes. In the case of males, the development of psychological maleness may not keep pace with the development of the outward physical appearance of maleness. The opposite process may take place in the case of females. Is this psychological lag due to some emotional event, to some disturbance in the functioning of obscure glands, or to some other reason as yet undefined? We do not know, and those who, at the present day, proclaim definite views on these matters promote their theories, without scientific justification, to the rank of established

facts. We can assert no more than that in certain individuals certain events in early childhood appear to hasten or delay the elimination of psychological characteristics of the other sex.

Some individuals, after a temporary arrest, recover and grow up to pattern. Others, though in infinitely varying degree, remain bisexual. Those who, untroubled by the conscious possession of psychological characteristics of the opposite sex, live, or tend to live, the sex life that is the basis of the family, are heterosexual and are called normal. It would be wiser to call them orthodox. Those in whom the psychological characteristics of the opposite sex more or less balance those of their own or predominate are unorthodox. They are homosexual, and are called invert or uranians.

Homosexuals are more numerous than uninformed people are prepared to believe. Between the extreme homosexual, who has to a considerable extent the mental characteristics of the opposite sex and is never attracted by it, and the person who lives an orthodox sex life, there lie an infinity of gradations. There are those who never give way to their inclination, and those who are not even aware of it. It is from them that one hears the most rabid denunciations of homosexuality. For they have to pay a heavy price, in the form of complicated psychological disturbances, for

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their arduous triumph over their own nature. There are those, also, who at some period of their existence—it may be late and after years of orthodox sex life—become aware of their condition and are henceforth consciously attracted towards persons of their own sex.

The popular mind harbours many misapprehensions on the subject of homosexuality. It is, for one thing, often confused with sodomy, which as a matter of fact is probably as prevalent (or as rare) in heterosexual as in homosexual relations. And then there is the confusion between effeminacy and homosexuality in men, and ill-poised masculinity and homosexuality in women. Extreme forms of homosexuality occur only in a minority of the persons affected. There are, among women, homosexuals who are perfect needlewomen, who love children, who are completely feminine. Among men there are homosexuals who are all-round sportsmen, soldiers, explorers, capable of all the energy and initiative we have come to associate with the term "manliness."

Homosexuality should not be a legal problem. I have no quarrel with those who would eradicate it, because it leads to the unhappiness of many, though by no means all those it affects. Moreover, the persecution of homosexuality by public opinion in some countries, and by savage laws (when men are concerned) in

England, tends to turn homosexuals into a caste with a group consciousness, with a spirit that becomes antisocial through being in rebellion against life and society. It makes useful members of the community adopt an attitude of aloofness from a world that misunderstands them. Homosexuals are induced to believe that as a body they are better than other people—individually they often are. It is not by persecution but by science that the mass production of homosexuals will be arrested.

It is often overlooked that there are social circumstances which favour the efflorescence of homosexuality. When heterosexual relations are made difficult, the seed of homosexuality which is carried within every human being springs up with surprising rapidity. This happens wherever a taboo is placed upon sex. It also happens (but this point is not relevant to the story of Oscar Wilde) where the harem system keeps women away from men, and prevents or delays the development of feelings that result from an easy and unrestrained social contact between the sexes. Italy, with its westernised harem system, is a case in point, as every man knows who has travelled in that country with open eyes and a knowledge of the language.

Oscar Wilde, then, was a person whose early

youth had been such that the feminine side of his psychology had not been eliminated. I have mentioned in passing that his mother tried for some time to ignore the fact that he was a boy. But the significance of this maternal idiosyncrasy can easily be overstressed by those who confuse homosexuality in men with effeminacy. Oscar Wilde was not effeminate. He was powerful, robust, and Irish. Undue delay in discarding petticoats would not turn a man into a copy of a woman. It might even produce a reaction towards extreme manliness. But it would tend to delay the infinitely subtle process of eliminating the feminine side from the boy's psychological make-up. In itself, this would not amount to much. It is more probable that excessive influence of the mother upon the development of the child is one of the determining factors that retard a boy's liberation from the bisexuality which belongs to all infants, and this undoubtedly happened in the case of Wilde. For homosexuals are not made, neither are they born. Out of the plastic material which is the human child orthodox and heterosexual adults could be made if parents knew their job. It is not a job they are taught by instinct. And it is doubtful whether science is sure enough of itself to teach them at present. But one thing is certain. Enlightenment will not come while

the silence recommended by St. Paul continues to be the watchword of society.

Frequently, but by no means universally, homosexual men display certain traits which are rarer among the heterosexual. There may be an affectation and a deliberation of speech. There may be a particular form of gesticulation, in which the palms of the raised hands are turned towards the interlocutor. There may also be a great interest taken in the decoration of the home and of the person. All these characteristics were eminently present in Oscar Wilde. Havelock Ellis has noticed among homosexuals a marked preference for green over other colours. Oscar Wilde himself had "that curious love of green, which in individuals is always the sign of a subtle artistic temperament, and in nations is said to denote a laxity, if not a decadence of morals," as he once wrote of someone else.

The homosexual temperament, we may say in conclusion, was present in Wilde to a fairly marked degree, though not to such an extent that it prevented marriage and procreation.¹ But upon this temperament was superimposed a lack of self-control due to his nationality, an almost primitive surrender to the fascinating sound of phrases, which came from his mother,

¹ It is alleged that he began the regular practice of homosexuality in 1886.

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and the devastating effect of success upon a soul seared by delayed recognition. He allowed no considerations of aesthetic poise or of worldly prudence to interfere with his determination to absorb all sensations. By 1895 drink and sexual indulgence had marked him down for the physical destruction that would have come, even if society and the law had not ordered the catastrophe in an unexpected manner.

X

DANGER SIGNALS

THE summer of 1891 saw the beginning of the friendship between Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas, which was to have such tragic results for them both. Lord Alfred was the third son of the eighth Marquis of Queensberry, and was still a student at Magdalen College, Oxford. One day the poet Lionel Johnson took him to Wilde's house in Tite Street. Douglas was not yet twenty-one, he was beautiful and he was gifted. He had already published poems that showed genuine talent. Moreover, he belonged to a great family and had a title. All this attracted Oscar. On his side, the young man was fascinated by the talk and the personality of his new acquaintance and flattered by the attentions of the well-known author. A deep friendship sprang up between them, and soon they were inseparable. Constance Wilde, to whom Douglas was introduced by her husband on the occasion of his first visit, also took to him. She told him, about a year after their first meeting, that she preferred him to any of Oscar's other friends.

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The two men, Wilde—aged beyond his years—and Douglas—younger than his—went about together, travelled together, and corresponded. Oscar wrote extravagant and poetic love-letters to his young friend. Wilde's biographer Frank Harris has accused Lord Alfred Douglas of having ruined Wilde. I have referred to this accusation in the previous chapter. It is absurd. Wilde's mind, though childish in some ways, was thoroughly settled. He was beyond being influenced or corrupted. It is clear that, except as regards the quarrel with Lord Alfred's father, to which we shall presently come, Oscar Wilde was all the time the active element in the relation between the two. A life of Wilde which contained no reference to this matter would be incomplete. I can think of no fairer way of discharging my duty than by quoting in its entirety the crucial passage concerning it from Lord Alfred Douglas's *Autobiography*. In this work, the author has told the world very definitely the nature of the relationship between him and his friend. To me, who hold no brief for Lord Alfred, the pages in his autobiography which are concerned with Oscar Wilde possess all the internal evidence of sincerity and reliability that a historian can desire.

“He wrote a sonnet to me, and gave it to me at dinner one night in a restaurant. That

was after I had known him about six months. It is in the Methuen complete edition, and it begins : ' The sin was mine, I did not understand.' Anyone who takes the trouble to read it carefully will see that it shows clearly that the ' familiarities ' (to use Harris's word) had not then begun. I wish to get over this odious subject once for all as quickly as possible. These familiarities were rare, but they did occur spasmodically. They began about nine months after I first met Oscar Wilde as the result of a long, patient and strenuous siege on his part. They were completely discontinued about six months before the final catastrophe, and were never resumed after he came out of prison. Wilde always claimed that his love for me was ideal and spiritual. I once, after he came out of prison, in the course of a somewhat acrimonious discussion, brought up against him that this was not strictly the case, and that there had been another side to it. He said : ' Oh, it was so little that, and then only by accident, essentially it was always a reaching up towards the ideal, and in the end it became utterly ideal.' Honestly, I believe he thought this to be true and meant what he said. In any case I am perfectly certain that his love for me, such as it really was before he went to prison, was the nearest he ever got to a pure and spiritual love. I have here, at great cost to

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myself, given a true account of our relations. Anyone is at liberty to believe me or not, but I wish to say solemnly that I have not tried to gloss them over or make them appear less guilty than they were. Of the sin which takes its name from one of the Cities of the Plain there never was the slightest question. I give this as my solemn word before God, as I hope to be saved. What there was, was quite bad enough. But, as I have already remarked, when all this happened I had been six years at school and at Oxford, and I had lost my moral sense and had no religion."

Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas went together to Paris, to Florence, to North Africa. They stayed with friends in the country. Wilde was Alfred Douglas's guest at Oxford, where a number of students had a real veneration for him, drank in his words and called him Master. But the Marquis of Queensberry strongly disapproved of the friendship between his son and the dramatist. It is not that he was particularly concerned with the moral or the worldly well-being of his son. He had been divorced by his wife, and did all he could to make her life a misery. Nor did he care for any of his children. He was a maniac, and one of his manias was a militant aversion to Christianity. One year, he refused to take the oath as a Scottish representative peer, because it was

“Christian tomfoolery.” As a result he was not re-elected by his fellow-peers. His hostility to the friendship with Wilde was due solely to his conviction that it was bound to cast aspersions upon his son and upon his name. And here Queensberry was right.

After the friendship had lasted for a few months, Queensberry told his son that he must put an end to it. The young man, who had recently come of age and considered that he could manage his affairs without parental dictation, took no notice of this order. Some correspondence ensued, and Queensberry told Lord Alfred that he was a baby and did not understand what he was doing. He also threatened to stop his son's allowance. Lord Alfred tells an amusing story of a meeting between Wilde and his father which took place at this period. The two friends were lunching at the Café Royal. In came the Marquis of Queensberry and sat down at a table near by. Lord Alfred went over to him and asked him to come and lunch at his table. Queensberry grumbled a little, but came. Oscar then performed one of those *tours de force* of which only he was capable. He began to talk, and soon brought the conversation to the subject of Christianity. If there was one matter upon which these two utterly different men saw eye to eye, it was Christianity. The pagan sceptic

and the fanatical atheist smiled at one another. It was like a Sunday afternoon meeting of the Secular Society. Then came the coffee, the cigars, the liqueurs. The young poet grew a little bored. He left the two philosophers together, and at four they were still talking and still agreeing. They parted only after they had agreed to meet again.

There was no further meeting, however, till later, and in very different circumstances. At the time Queensberry wrote to his son that Wilde was charming and clever. But two months had not passed before he had forgotten everything except his former hatred. There were new demands, and new threats as to the allowance. Lord Alfred, however, was as strong-minded as his father, and refused to give way. Once, having received a particularly insulting letter from his father, he replied by telegram : " What a funny little man you are ! " There was, henceforth, a state of open warfare between father and son. Queensberry, who had at one time been amateur light-weight boxing champion, and who was the author of the famous Queensberry rules, threatened to thrash his son if he found him in Wilde's company. He sent word to the managers of the restaurants they were accustomed to frequent that he would assault the two friends if he found them on the premises. But Wilde and Lord

Alfred took no notice of these threats, and continued to enjoy life as before.

Queensberry now changed his tactics. He decided to compel Wilde to take legal proceedings against him, in which case, he was convinced, it would not be difficult to break Wilde. "I'll teach the fellow to leave my son alone," he kept on repeating. "I'll not have their names coupled together." He tried various methods, such as writing highly offensive letters about Wilde to his son. It is probable, however, that these letters would have been regarded as privileged by a court of law. Queensberry actually called on Wilde and repeated his threats, but Wilde theatrically declared, "I don't know what the Queensberry rules are, but the Wilde rule is to shoot at sight." When *The Importance of Being Earnest* was produced (February 14th, 1895) Queensberry bought a stall with the intention of creating an uproar, but George Alexander returned his money. Queensberry then went to the stage door carrying a bunch of turnips and carrots with the intention of throwing them at Wilde. But Wilde left by another exit.

At this period, no one took Queensberry's threats very seriously. He had failed, after all, to execute his threats of personal violence, and what else could he do? No doubt, Oscar's life

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was not blameless. But though almost everyone whispered dreadful things, nobody knew definitely compromising details. He was in the habit of consorting with grooms, valets, and male prostitutes, he had stayed at hotels and broken the law with several of them. He had been blackmailed at least once. But had he not covered his traces with the utmost care? And what were these things, after all, but little fragments of that outside world which the artist can fashion to his will? All that was disagreeable and uncomfortable could be dismissed with a shrug of the shoulders. Indeed, it was enough to cease thinking about it for it to be non-existent.

Lord Alfred Douglas repeatedly insisted that Oscar must take proceedings against his father. Wilde went abroad. We do not know what passed in his mind at this period. Was he frightened? Was he so tired of his present existence that he did not mind what happened? André Gide relates a strange conversation he had with Wilde at this moment. Apparently, Gide tried to persuade him not to return to England. "Do you know what you are risking?" he asked. Oscar replied: "One should not know. . . . My friends are extraordinary. They advise me to be careful. Careful! But can I be careful? It would mean turning back. I must go as far as

possible. . . . I can't go further. . . . Something will happen . . . something else."

But are these words authentic? Can Oscar Wilde really have felt that he was moving towards an inevitable fulfilment? That in his life there was one part he had not yet played, and that, since the fates had cast him for it, he must accept it? It seems unlikely. I will not go so far as to say that Gide imagined the conversation he reports, although it was certainly written at a later stage, and from memory. Gide has a way of over-subtilising, of looking for hidden recesses in the souls of others, of rejecting the obvious. The obvious is so often the only explanation of human behaviour that will stand the test of a searching analysis. The impression which the author of *Si le Grain ne meurt* tries to create is that Oscar was being dragged, against his better knowledge, towards the destruction he foresaw and dreaded. But in reality the book conveys a very different picture: that of a man who is very sure of himself, sees only one road before him, and goes ahead without an inkling of the fact that there is an alternative way.

Gide tells of an incident which happened a few days before this conversation, and which throws further light upon Oscar Wilde's frame of mind at this period. They were staying at Algiers. Oscar and Gide went out together

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one evening. They left their cab, and went into a little native café where there was music. "Suddenly, in the half-open door there appeared a marvellous adolescent. . . . His large dark eyes had the languor that comes from hashish. His skin had the colour of an olive. His childish body was slender." He sat down in front of them, and produced from his Tunisian waistcoat a reed flute upon which he began to play exquisitely while another player accompanied him upon a stringed instrument. At last, Gide and his companion left. Suddenly, Wilde stopped, and placing his enormous hand upon Gide's shoulder, he bent down towards him and whispered :

"Dear, do you want the little musician ? "

Gide was staggered. He had never discussed his inclinations with Wilde. He had been brought up a Protestant. He was as reserved and self-contained as the Irishman was communicative and ready to display his inner self. At last he brought out one word, "Yes." Wilde spoke for some time with the native guide, and then they returned to their waiting carriage.

"As soon as we were seated," Gide goes on, "Wilde began to laugh. It was a sonorous laugh, not so much gay as triumphant, an interminable, uncontrollable, insolent laugh. The more he saw how it put me out of

countenance, the more he laughed. He enjoyed himself like a child, like a devil. The great pleasure of the debauchee is to drag others into debauchery." They waited a long while at another café. At last Wilde looked at his watch and stood up.

"It is time," he said.

They walked towards a very ugly quarter of the town, Wilde leading the way. They arrived at a house with a double entrance, where to Gide's horror two policemen were stationed.

"Dear," said Wilde, "it only proves that this hotel is very safe. They are here to protect strangers. I know them. They are excellent fellows who are very fond of my cigarettes. They understand perfectly."

Preceded by the policemen, they climbed to the second floor, where there was a tiny two-roomed flat, of which Wilde had the key in his pocket. Soon afterwards the guide brought in two boys. "Wilde made me go into the further room with little Mohammed, and he locked himself in the first room with the other musician."

Oscar Wilde returned to England to face the Marquis of Queensberry, and to swear that his accusations were baseless.

XI

CATASTROPHE

LORD QUEENSBERRY, alarmed by a letter from his son (Lord Alfred Douglas) threatening him with a prosecution for criminal libel and seven years' penal servitude, decided to press the attack and to choose his own ground for the fight. He went to the Albemarle Club, of which Oscar Wilde was a member, and delivered to the porter a card on which he had written in large letters "Oscar Wilde, posing as a sodomite." The wording of the card was clever. Queensberry accused his opponent of nothing more than a vicious pose. If unable to prove anything compromising against Wilde, he could still escape by pleading that he had merely accused him of adopting a pose which was dangerous to the morals of others. The porter acted with that supreme tact characteristic of the custodians of English *savoir-faire*: the uniformed proletarian did a simple thing which might have brought to nought the blustering and ungentlemanly action of his social superior. He placed the offensive card in an envelope, and, until he handed it

to Oscar upon his return, on February 20th, it was seen by nobody but himself.

When Wilde returned, his mind was already made up. He might, as a wise friend remarked a little later, have torn the card up, and nobody would have been any the worse or the wiser. But he hastened to consult a solicitor. Lord Alfred was not in London at the time, and it cannot be said, therefore, that he actually advised his friend to take the final fatal step. But nobody denies that he had for many months been in favour of action. He was as fearless as his father, and absolutely determined not to submit to his dictation.

Mr. C. V. Humphreys, the senior partner of the firm of Humphreys and May, received Oscar Wilde, who asked him to institute proceedings for criminal libel against Lord Queensberry. Humphreys and May were family solicitors. They had no experience of criminal matters, and Mr. Humphreys had no understanding of the questions involved. He asked his client whether there was any truth whatsoever in the libel. Without hesitation, Wilde declared on oath that there was none. "If you are innocent," said Humphreys, "you should succeed." Wilde himself applied at the police court for a warrant for Queensberry's arrest. After the purely formal proceedings at the police court, both parties

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began to prepare for the great legal battle, in which, though technically Oscar was the prosecutor, he would in fact be called upon to defend and justify himself.

Queensberry's solicitor offered the brief to an Irish barrister, Edward Carson, and Carson agreed to act against his former fellow-student, Wilde. As for Humphreys, he briefed Sir Edward Clarke, a churchman and a saint, who knew even less about homosexuality than the solicitor who instructed him. Wilde was handicapped from the beginning. His advisers, whom he had left in the dark, moved on a plane different from his.

The day before the trial Wilde and Lord Alfred, who had returned to London, met Bernard Shaw and Frank Harris at the Café Royal. Wilde asked Harris if he would go into the witness-box the next day and declare that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was a highly moral book. The recollections of Shaw, Douglas, and Harris as to the conversation that ensued are somewhat at variance, but they agree on the main points. Harris told Wilde what would, in his opinion, be the course of events, and his prophecy proved true to the last word. He predicted failure and disaster, and advised Wilde to leave at once for France. Wilde declared that he could not draw back ; nor could Lord Alfred be convinced. And, indeed,

the cautious wording of Queensberry's accusation justified the belief that no damaging facts were known against Wilde. Finally, Oscar and his friend rose and left abruptly.

On April 3rd, Oscar set out to face his accuser. He was driven to the Old Bailey in a brougham with two horses and liveried servants. He was utterly confident of success. The news that Carson was to cross-examine him was very reassuring: he had the deepest contempt for the intellectual capacities of his compatriot. And certainly, it seemed almost unfair to pit these two men against one another. Carson was slow, all nose and lips, and his heavy brogue was not engaging. Oscar was nimble and sparkling, his accent perfect, his manner suave and conversational. He appeared to be enjoying himself hugely. Soon the jury and the fashionable people who crowded the court were tittering. The celebrated dramatist was giving them the show of their lives. Again and again, he scored over Carson. The most florid of the letters Wilde had written to Alfred Douglas was read in court.

"MY OWN BOY," it ran, "Your sonnet is quite lovely, and it is a marvel that those red rose-leaf lips of yours should have been made no less for the music of song than for the madness of kisses. Your slim gilt soul walks between passion and poetry. I know Hyacinthus, whom Apollo loved so madly,

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was you in Greek days. Why are you alone in London, and when do you go to Salisbury? Do go there to cool your hands in the grey twilight of Gothic things, and come here whenever you like. It is a lovely place—it only lacks you; but go to Salisbury first.—Always with undying love, Yours
“OSCAR.”

“Suppose a man who was not an artist had written this letter, would you say it was a proper letter?” asked Carson.

“A man who was not an artist could not have written that letter,” replied Oscar. At this moment, the jury was definitely on his side. There was a murmur of approval in court.

At the end of the first day, Oscar looked like winning. The evening papers were rather friendly and praised him for the way in which he had defended his positions. But in reality, things were not going so well. Sir Edward Clarke had fought in the most urbane manner, never once taking his gloves off. He based himself from beginning to end upon Wilde's declaration that he was innocent. He told the jury that a literary man of high repute had been accused by an eccentric old nobleman of something unmentionable, whereas there was nothing either in the life or the works of his client that would not bear investigation. What Clarke did not know was that his client was indeed guilty in the eyes of the law,

and that his opponents had the fullest proof of his guilt. While preparing his case, Queensberry's solicitor had employed a private detective who, by the merest accident, had stumbled upon damning evidence against Oscar Wilde. It is said that in the course of conversation with this man a prostitute had told him that business was very bad owing to the influence of Oscar Wilde. When he questioned her further, she gave him an address where he could find all he wanted to know. At the address indicated the detective found a correspondence bureau where young homosexuals collected letters, and a number of documents were discovered connecting some of these young men with Oscar Wilde. A whole chain of evidence was thus established, and it became possible to reconstruct much of that side of Wilde's life which he had thought would remain for ever hidden from the world.

Now a counsel who had been aware of the facts at Carson's disposal would have followed an entirely different method from that adopted by Clarke. He would have attacked Queensberry, produced proofs of his cruelty to his family, and created a strong atmosphere of prejudice against him. He would certainly have called Lord Alfred Douglas as a witness, and from the way in which, on subsequent occasions, Lord Alfred comported himself in

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the witness-box we may be sure that he would have fought with ability, and possibly with success. He would certainly have proved that here was no case of a loving father fighting to save his son. To the end, Douglas expected to be called, and held himself in readiness.

The second day began in the same way as the first. Wilde, still sure of himself, continued to fence with admirable dexterity. But on the first day Carson had threatened that he would make himself very plain before he had done, and it was not long before he began to show what he had in mind. He questioned Wilde about all the shady acquaintances he had cultivated, about a public-school man named Taylor, who introduced him to young men of the working-class, about grooms and coachmen to whom he had given champagne suppers. Wilde preserved his perfect composure. Then, unexpectedly, the opportunity for which Carson had been waiting offered itself. A young servant at Oxford was mentioned.

"Did you ever kiss him?" asked Carson.

"He was a particularly plain boy. He was unfortunately very ugly. I pitied him for it," answered Wilde. This was Carson's great moment. He made Wilde turn to the jury and repeat his answer. He asked him what he meant by it. Wilde struggled in vain. He faltered. He grew indignant. He was almost

in tears. He tried to explain. But Carson had taken the lead, and did not mean to give it up. One after the other, he rattled out his merciless questions. He became circumstantial, precise. Wilde was no longer parrying. He was protesting. He had completely broken down.

It has often been said that he threw away his chances by this one flippant reply. Such a view cannot be maintained, once it is realised what cards Carson still held in his hand. Wilde's breakdown facilitated Carson's task, because it enabled the jury to read on the face of the victim the verdict they were bound to return. The lawsuit would in any case not have been decided by Wilde's conduct in the witness-box. Carson firmly intended to produce conclusive evidence for all his assertions.

When the Court adjourned for the day, it was known that Wilde was defeated. In the course of the afternoon, there had been rumours that he had fled. Conceivably, on that evening of the second day, he was given a hint that it would be a good thing for him if he left the country. There could be no doubt that, as soon as a verdict had been given against him, he would be arrested and a prosecution would be instituted. On the other hand, the public prosecutor could not prejudge the issue by intervening before the verdict had been given. This left a short breathing-space to the defeated

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man. And it cannot be said that the authorities were anxious to step in. Other names might become involved. An official of the Home Office is said to have remarked at the time : " There are on the books of Scotland Yard upwards of 20,000 persons belonging to the better classes in London alone who are watched by the police, but who are not interfered with because they do not themselves provoke investigation." The whole proceedings would in any case be highly unedifying.

Oscar Wilde himself wavered. He finally decided to wait, but he knew that he was doomed. Sir Edward Clarke was also undecided. And so the third day of the Queensberry trial opened. A large crowd was waiting at the Old Bailey to see the arrival of the principal figures. The public was now violently hostile to Wilde. Carson announced that he intended to call his witnesses. " I have to bring before you these young men, one after another, to tell their tales. . . . One thing I will say, these young men are more sinned against than sinning. Let those who would blame them remember that." For most of the young men whom Carson recommended to the tender sympathy of the British jury Oscar Wilde had been a client on the same footing as any of the other clients they were ready to oblige.

Sir Edward Clarke, however, had made up

his mind. While Carson was on his feet, he began to talk to him in an undertone. Presently he rose, and announced that in the interests of his client he would submit to a verdict of not guilty. The jury, charged accordingly by the judge, returned a verdict of not guilty, and the foreman declared: "We also find that the publication was for the public benefit." There was applause in court, and the public outside took it up. The Marquis of Queensberry walked out, his head erect, feeling that he had vindicated his family name and ridded society of a pest. Some time afterwards a group of gentlemen gave him a dinner to celebrate his success.

Oscar Wilde immediately issued a declaration to the press. He tried to maintain that he had decided to abandon the prosecution because to have gone on with it would have meant putting Lord Alfred Douglas into the witness-box, and that, although Lord Alfred was extremely anxious to give evidence, he had refused to put him in so painful a position. He then drove, accompanied by Lord Alfred Douglas, to the offices of Sir George Lewis, a solicitor whom he knew personally. But Lewis had no comfort to offer. He said that the action should never have been begun.¹ After lunch Wilde went for a long drive. He with-

¹ Some accounts place this conversation at an earlier date.

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drew a considerable sum of money from a bank, which appears to indicate that he played with the idea of escaping abroad. It seems that the highest authorities wished to give him a last opportunity to get away. But he made no use of the money. He was unable to come to a decision. It is difficult to believe that pride decided him to see the thing through. There was no pride in Oscar, at this moment. Only an immense fatigue, a great and bitter disillusionment. Life, instead of being the clay he moulded to his will, had suddenly assumed an unexpected rigidity. Life, not the artist, was the master.

XII

DEBACLE

THE defeated man sat in Lord Alfred Douglas's rooms at the Cadogan Hotel in Sloane Square. He knew what was coming. He spent the time of suspense reading the *Yellow Book*, that publication with which his name is always associated and with which he had no connection. Then he read the evening papers. Smoking innumerable cigarettes and drinking one tumblerful of whisky and soda after another, he reflected on his miserable collapse. A month ago, he was the great playwright, the King of Language, the King of Life. Two plays of his were at this moment running in London. But he was defeated. All was lost, and the social halo, which he valued more than literature, had been torn from his head overnight. Suffering was all the future held out to him. He did not realise at the time that had he been able to map out his own existence with that detachment with which he regulated the motions of the puppets he sent across the stage, he could not have invented a more perfect ending for the story. His life had now assumed a great-

ness far beyond his dreams. A protracted and apparently fruitless struggle had suddenly ended in surprising success, arrogantly and violently exploited. Whither could it have led but to the final drying up of the source of inspiration? Gradual eclipse and oblivion would have been his. And now, as in the tragedies of his beloved Greeks, Necessity claimed her portion.

At six o'clock, two detectives knocked at the door. They had a warrant for Oscar's arrest. He was drunk, but he was able to follow them into a waiting cab. He was first taken to Scotland Yard, and then to Bow Street, where he was charged. He refused to eat, and spent the night pacing up and down his cell. The gaolers allowed journalists to come and peep at him through the wicket in the door. The newspaper boys shouted through the streets, the posters announced the news: "Arrest of Oscar Wilde." At the evening meal every Englishman gravely said to his attentive wife "I told you so," and she admired her husband's wisdom and foreknowledge. On the following day, Oscar was committed for trial and transferred to Holloway prison, where he was kept for nineteen days before his appearance at the Old Bailey.

The first effect of Oscar Wilde's arrest was the hurried exodus of some of the 20,000 people who were on the books of Scotland Yard. All

those who could afford the luxury of travel crossed the Channel. The English colony in Paris increased day by day. Some did not trouble to go so far, and settled at Calais or Boulogne till the storm blew over.

As far as Oscar himself was concerned, dishonour was but one of the penalties he had to pay for his imprudence. Many of those who had been keenest on cultivating him hastened to deny him. John Lane withdrew his books from circulation ; booksellers and libraries refused to stock them. The two plays that were running were not immediately withdrawn. They were too successful. A beautiful compromise was reached that suited the English public of the day down to the ground. On all the bills, the name of the author was covered over with opaque paper. Who was to know, henceforth, by whom *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* had been written ? Respectable people could go and see these plays without fear of compromising their reputations.

Oscar's arrest was the signal for his creditors to demand settlement. Though he had lived extravagantly, his debts could easily have been paid if only a little patience had been exercised. For royalties continued to accumulate from the performance of the plays. Judgements were given and the bailiffs were put in at Tite Street.

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A sale of the contents of his home was held. A crowd invaded the house, few of whom were genuine buyers. The authorities did nothing to preserve order or to protect the prisoner's property. Doors were broken open, drawers were forced, manuscripts and letters were strewn over the floor. Many valuables were stolen. Among the manuscripts which disappeared on that day were the scenarios of one or two comedies and an enlarged version of *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*¹ Furniture, books and prints went for next to nothing. Oscar's beautiful library, with presentation copies from Victor Hugo, Walt Whitman, Swinburne, Mallarmé, William Morris and Verlaine, with editions of the works of his father and his mother in lovely bindings, was sold and dispersed. A fine Whistler was knocked down for six pounds. Rothenstein bought a Monticelli for eight pounds. He sold it, for Wilde's benefit, to Colnaghi at a much higher price.

Meanwhile, the authorities were actively preparing their case. Queensberry's solicitors had sent a copy of all their witnesses' statements, together with a copy of the shorthand note of the trial, to the Director of Public Prosecutions.

¹ This version turned up in America some years ago, and was published in a limited edition by Mitchell Kennerley in 1921. Ten copies were issued in England with cancelled title-page bearing Duckworth's imprint, for copyright purposes.

All the witnesses whose names had thus been provided were told that they could choose between giving evidence against Wilde or being prosecuted themselves. Taylor, who had been mentioned in the Queensberry trial as the man who had introduced Wilde to young men of the working-class, was visited by an Inspector of Scotland Yard, who told him that he would be safe if he gave evidence. Taylor refused, and was at once arrested and prosecuted. He was given two years' hard labour. One witness, who had already made damaging admissions to the police, was urged by Lord Alfred Douglas to remember that he was a gentleman and a public-school boy. He remembered, and withdrew his previous declaration.

For Lord Alfred stoutly supported his friend. On the day of his arrest, he went to Bow Street and tried to bail him out. He was, however, unsuccessful. Every day he went to see him at Holloway prison. There, separated from the prisoner by a wide corridor between two rows of bars, with other visitors at his side and other prisoners opposite, he shouted his consolations at the wretch, who was rather deaf and looked at him with tears in his eyes. Pressed by Oscar Wilde, who himself had been prompted by his legal advisers, Lord Alfred left the country on the day before the trial.

From Calais he continued to write daily to him, and was prepared to come back whenever called upon.

Sir Edward Clarke had undertaken the defence of Oscar Wilde, who was now a poor prisoner and could not afford to pay for his services. Whatever may be thought of the way in which he conducted Wilde's defence, it must be admitted that Sir Edward Clarke did a generous thing. He abhorred the actions of which his client was accused, he knew that the accusation was true, and he resented having been misled by Wilde's perjury to his solicitor. But he considered it his duty to stand by him, and did his best according to his lights. Again Lord Alfred offered to go into the witness-box ; again Clarke refused to call him. Lord Alfred is convinced to this day that if he had been allowed to appear Wilde would have been saved.

On April 26th Oscar Wilde appeared before Mr. Justice Charles at the Old Bailey, to be tried for offences under the Criminal Law Amendment Act. The reporters declared that he looked "careworn and much thinner." One after the other, his accomplices gave the evidence which was to save them from prosecution. The jury retired and stayed away for a long time. Finally it was announced that they could not agree, and a re-trial was ordered.

One solitary juryman stood out against the evidence and the views of his colleagues, but this man, who placed his conscience above the unenlightened law of his country, rendered no good service to Wilde. It has since become known that if Mr. Justice Charles had had to pronounce sentence, he would have given Wilde at the most six months' imprisonment.

A new effort was now made to obtain bail, and this time it was not refused. It was fixed at £3000. Lord Douglas of Hawick, Lord Alfred's eldest surviving brother, together with Mr. Stewart Headlam, a clergyman of the Church of England who was a stranger to Wilde but declared that he had shown him beauty on a high hill, went bail for Oscar Wilde. Lord Douglas of Hawick took him to an hotel where he had engaged rooms for him. Just as Oscar was starting dinner in his private room the manager came up to him, said that he knew who he was, and ordered him to leave the hotel at once. He then drove to another hotel, and, too miserable to try and eat, was just about to go to bed when he was again turned out. The Marquis of Queensberry had followed him from the gates of Holloway prison and threatened the managers of the hotels with violence if they allowed Wilde to stay. After one or two further unsuccessful efforts, the hunted wretch went to

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his mother's house in Oakley Street. It was past midnight when he knocked at the door. "Willy, give me a shelter or I shall die in the streets!" he cried out as his brother let him in.

Oscar spent several days at Oakley Street. He was completely demoralised, and hardly moved from his chair or his couch. He suffered from an unquenchable thirst and drank gallons of lemonade and claret and soda water. But he still remained the theatrical and childlike creature he had always been. Robert Sherard came over from Paris, where he was living, to see him. He was lying on a camp-bedstead in a corner of an untidy room, his appearance was dishevelled, his face was swollen, and his voice broken. "Oh, why have you brought me no poison from Paris?" he asked. The alliteration caught his fancy, and throughout the visit he kept repeating: "Poison from Paris! Poison from Paris!"

It is almost certain that the authorities would have placed no obstacles in the way of an escape abroad. Sherard tried various experiments which proved conclusively that Oscar was not kept under observation.¹ Many of

¹ Frank Harris says that a yacht was kept under steam and a carriage with fast horses held in readiness. The story of the yacht is supported by the testimony of Lord Alfred Douglas, but denied by Sherard and other people who knew Wilde.

Oscar's friends advised him to go. Lord Douglas of Hawick, who had privately undertaken to cover Headlam's loss if Wilde broke his bail, declared : " It will practically ruin me if I lose all that money at the present moment, but if there is even a chance of conviction, in God's name let him go." To his brother he wrote that he sincerely hoped that Oscar would escape, and that he was quite prepared to " stand the racket." Lord Alfred wrote from Calais urging Oscar to join him. Sherard and others added their entreaties. But his mother and his brother were determined that he should not go. Poor dilapidated Lady Wilde proudly told him that if he left the country she would never speak to him again. Willy Wilde melodramatically proclaimed : " He is an Irish gentleman, and he will face the music." Willy Wilde, usually in his cups, loved the sound of his own voice. He related to each visitor in turn how Oscar had arrived at Oakley Street on the day he was released on bail : " He came tapping with his beak against the window pane, and fell down on my threshold like a wounded stag." Before he admitted a visitor, Willy cross-questioned him about his attitude towards the projected escape. " Are you urging him to flee ? " " Prison," commented one visitor, " does not seem such a disgrace in Ireland." These

family advisers carried the day. More than once, Oscar's determination faltered, but he finally made up his mind that he would not go. He decided that he could not "let down" his bailsmen, and that to flee would be dishonourable. He also thought that he stood "a good chance of being acquitted." And finally, it seemed to him that what he would find beyond the Channel would hardly be preferable to what he would be avoiding. "A dishonoured name, a hunted life, are not for me to whom you have been revealed on that high hill where beautiful things are transfigured," he wrote to Lord Alfred Douglas. "I cannot see myself slinking about the Continent, a fugitive from justice," he said to another friend.

The second trial arrived, and the whole evidence of grooms, male prostitutes, and chambermaids was reeled off once more. The conviction of Taylor, who, having refused to give evidence against Oscar, was treated as an accomplice, was naturally prejudicial to him. A law officer, Sir Frank Lockwood, led for the prosecution. Wilde dreaded the ordeal of the cross-examination. "I shall break down," he repeated. But when the time came, he bore up better than he had expected. The night before the verdict was expected his serenity returned. He no longer expected an acquittal,

though he still had some illusions as to the length of the sentence that awaited him. He took leave of his friends, and offered each of them a little gift to be kept by them if he did not return home the next day. He spent some time alone with his mother, and retired early. The next day, Saturday, May 25th, saw the end of the drama. The summing-up of Mr. Justice Wills was not friendly to the accused, but the jury took a long time considering their decision. Finally they came back into court with a verdict of guilty on all counts. The judge's comments on passing sentence of two years' hard labour were scathing.

Oscar Wilde heard the sentence with a face expressive of horror: he turned purple, and his eyes protruded. Then he recovered his composure. "And I? May I say nothing, my lord?" But the judge waved to the warders, Oscar turned round once more, gave a wild look at the court, and disappeared below.

Outside, the rabble were cheering themselves hoarse. Men and women joined hands, and danced the frenzied and inharmonious steps which are the only form of popular dance left to the urban proletariat of England, the land that once taught Europe the *contredanse*. But the joy of the populace at the conviction of Oscar Wilde sprang from social rather than

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from ethical feelings. It celebrated the fact that one of its masters had been stricken by the Law, which is greater than all individuals.

Of the verdict, nowadays, English people are not so proud. Oscar Wilde was found guilty of actions that would have involved no punishment in other European countries. There had been nothing public in his actions. He did not lead innocent young persons into vice : all the witnesses were sophisticated young men for whom Wilde was but one episode in a series. Chatting, laughing, smoking, unaware that they had taken part in a tragedy, they stepped into cabs and were driven back after the trial to the life they had left for a moment. "The verdict was just," wrote the late Edward Marjoribanks, in his *Life of Lord Carson*, "but, even so, to a lawyer at least, or to anyone interested in the administration of justice, it does not dispose of the question of whether or no he was unfairly convicted." In the opinion of the same author, Wilde received "a savage sentence." Marjoribanks's comment is worth repeating. "Had the Court of Criminal Appeal existed then, it is possible that either the conviction, owing to the circumstances of the trial and the uncorroborated evidence of the accomplices, or the sentence, which was a heavy one, would not have stood."

XIII

“THINGS ARE WHAT THEY ARE”

OSCAR WILDE was sent to Wandsworth gaol. The English prison system is harsh, and was especially intolerable to a man with a sensitive artistic nature. But, from the beginning, he did his best to fall in with the regulations. He soon learned that, to save the trouble of cleaning it, no experienced prisoner ever washes in his hand-basin, but in the receptacle in which he takes his food, which has to be cleaned and scoured in any case. He learned the meticulous arrangement of the prisoner's utensils which is so indispensable to the happiness of prison officials, and which is enforced with severe penalties. He was unable to escape these penalties altogether : a man is usually punished a few times at the beginning of his term of imprisonment, in order that he may realise that his gaolers mean business. So little spirit of rebellion was there in Oscar, that he often woke up in the middle of the night and rose in order to make sure that everything in his cell was in the right place. For the remainder of his life he retained the

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habit of nervously arranging objects that lay before him into some sort of symmetrical order.

Wilde made the acquaintance of that excellent official, the prison chaplain.

“Were you in the habit of saying family prayers at home, Mr. Wilde?” he was asked.

“I’m afraid not.”

“You see where you are now.”

At the beginning, he found it difficult to consume the nauseous and evil-smelling prison food provided. He suffered greatly from hunger. When at last he forced himself to eat, the immediate result was diarrhoea. He was already sufficiently cowed to refrain from asking to see the doctor, but after eight weeks he became so ill that he had to be sent to the prison hospital. He was so depressed, in those days, that he seriously thought of committing suicide.

After the first period of rigorous breaking in, Wilde was allowed to read one book a week. The deprivation of books other than the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer had been a source of great distress to him. But the prison library, though it contained a few books by Pater and Newman, was hardly suited to persons of his intellectual level.

He was allowed one visit every quarter. Sherard, the first visitor, came to see him in

August. He found Wilde, who was separated from him by the usual double row of bars, depressed and tearful. His hands were disfigured, his nails broken and his fingers bleeding from the oakum picking. But the relative comfort and the better fare of the hospital helped him somewhat to recover his balance, and he was considerably encouraged by another event. Since the collapse of the Queensberry prosecution he had not seen his wife. When the bankruptcy and the sale at Tite Street took place, she went with her children to some friends, and during the period when he was on bail no communication had passed between them. After his first visit Robert Sherard entered into correspondence with Constance Wilde, and although her relatives were advising her to divorce Oscar, she consented to forgive and visit him. She was allowed to go to Wandsworth gaol in September, although another visit was not yet due. She was very affected by the sight of him, and by the fact that she was not allowed to come near him. She spoke affectionately to him and told him that, on his release, she was willing to set up house with him and with the children once more. This visit cheered Oscar immensely. But they were to meet only once again. In the spring of the following year his mother died, and Constance, who was at Genoa, and in bad health, insisted

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on making the journey to England to break the news gently to him. She knew how very attached he was to his mother.

On November 13th (1895) Wilde was transferred to Reading gaol. At Clapham Junction Station¹ the gang of convicts with whom he made the journey were kept waiting, manacled and chained together, on the central platform from two till half-past two in the afternoon. He stood there, shivering in his inadequate prison garb, insufficiently protected from the November drizzle, while an inquisitive crowd collected round him and his fellow-prisoners. He had again been in hospital, and had been removed from it without a moment's notice or preparation. It requires little imagination to realise how miserable he must have felt. Suddenly, an onlooker recognised him. "By God, that's Oscar Wilde!" he shouted, moved towards him, and spat in his face. "Oscar Wilde! Oscar Wilde!" shouted the crowd, and the laughter and the jeering continued till the train swallowed its tragic load.

At Reading gaol, another ordeal awaited Wilde. The governor, Major Isaacson, was afraid lest he might be suspected of partiality towards a prisoner of better social standing than his usual boarders. He therefore treated him

¹ Another report places the incident at Wandsworth Road Station.

with special harshness, declaring that he would purge him of his whims. No opportunity for punishment was allowed to pass. Not only did Oscar lose all those precious remission marks which abbreviate the ordinary prisoner's term, but he was given enough bad marks to cancel out the remission marks earned at Wandsworth, and at Reading after the blessed disappearance of Major Isaacson. Many of the warders took their cue from the governor. There are, as every ex-convict knows, disciplinarians who take to brutality with a delight which testifies to their vocation. It is no more difficult for a warder than for a non-commissioned officer to find a man at fault. Prison and army regulations have been framed in the spirit in which the restrictive clauses of certain leases are drawn up. No human being could fail to break them, and their breach gives the warder, the officer, the landlord, the right to exercise power if and when he feels inclined. "Find out what the children are doing, and tell them not to," said the Victorian mother to the nurse. See what prisoner C.3.3. is doing, and punish him for it, seems to have been the spirit of Major Isaacson's instructions to his subordinates.

One day, Wilde was caught conversing with a fellow-prisoner. He had not learnt the art of talking with a blank face and without any

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movement of the lips which is so useful to prisoners. The culprits were sent before the governor. Under the regulations, a man who began a conversation received a double punishment, and Major Isaacson therefore tried to find out who had spoken first. The other prisoner declared that he had opened the conversation, and so did Wilde. “ I cannot understand this,” said the Major to Oscar. “ I should have thought one of you must have spoken first. I shall have to give you both double punishment.” “ The man had no imagination,” said Oscar when relating the story to a friend, after his release.

Rumours of his ill-treatment had travelled to London. A visitor inquired if they were true. Oscar, by now broken and cowed, almost grovelled, and begged him not to mention the subject. He was convinced that nobody in or out of gaol could defy the governor without bringing further punishment and suffering upon him.

Steps were taken, nevertheless, to inform the Home Office, and a new governor, Major Nelson, was appointed. He was just and humane. With his arrival, a new era dawned for Wilde. He was given several concessions possible without the actual infringement of the regulations. He had still to perform the prisoner’s usual task—to pick oakum, turn the

crank that supplied the prison with water, and go down on his knees to scrub the floor of his cell—but he was allowed to receive books from his friends, and during the long solitary hours in his cell he read the Greek Testament, Dante, and much current literature. Some of the books he asked for were permitted, others not. One cannot always gather what principles guided the prison officials. They approved of Flaubert's *Salammbô*, but not of *La Tentation de St. Antoine*; he was allowed Strindberg, but not Ibsen (who was probably considered immoral). Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis* was also forbidden. He was allowed to have a copy of his *Salomé*, but not reviews of it. Some of the authors whose books he asked for were Mérimée, Anatole France, Pierre Louys, Montaigne, A. E. W. Mason. He also asked for a French Bible, a French-English dictionary, Yeats's *The Secret Rose*, and a translation of Calderon.

One day the governor called him into his office. He told him that *Salomé* had been performed in Paris, and had been a success, and announced that a further great concession was to be made to him.¹ He would be allowed writing materials. This was the sunniest moment in two years of misery. He began to make excerpts from Dante “for the pleasure

¹ As a result of representations made by Haldane.

of using pen and ink,” he wrote to a friend. There were, however, other consolations as well. It was characteristic of Oscar Wilde’s temperament that he could pass with the greatest facility from the depth of despondency to irony and mirth. Shortly after Major Isaacson’s removal from the governorship, the Home Office sent two officials to Reading gaol in order to find out whether Wilde’s health made it necessary to liberate him. When they arrived, they were informed that he was in the prison infirmary, and they were taken to a passage from which, through the wicket in the door, they could see the prisoners. Wilde sat on the side of his bed, surrounded by half a dozen other patients, and was holding forth with all the verve of the days of his freedom. He was monopolising the talk, even in this dreary place, and he could not have wished for a more appreciative audience. The prisoners were holding their sides with laughter. The commissioners returned to London and reported that the prison system suited him admirably.

Wilde always found it easy to make friends with people of the working-class. He was popular with the other convicts. And not all the warders were dehumanised by their occupation. Several of them liked him so much that they systematically broke the prison regulations in his favour. They realised that

the prison fare did not suit him, and often smuggled scones, sausage-rolls, meat pies, and pieces of cake into his cell. There was one warder in particular who had a profound and touching admiration for him. He was a great reader, and missed no opportunity of improving his mind by talking to the prisoner. Voltaire, Shelley, agnosticism, art, the Bible, Renan, and many other topics were discussed.

"Excuse me, sir, but Charles Dickens, sir, would he be considered a great writer now, sir?" the warder inquired on one occasion.

"Oh yes; a great writer, indeed. You see he is no longer alive."

"Yes, I understand, sir. Being dead he would be a great writer, sir."

On another occasion, John Strange Winter was mentioned.

"Would you tell me what you think of him, sir?"

"A charming person, but a lady, you know, not a man. Not a great stylist, perhaps, but a good, simple story-teller."

"Thank you, sir, I did not know he was a lady, sir."

Once Marie Corelli was the author discussed:

"Excuse me, sir, but Marie Corelli, would she be considered a great writer, sir?"

"Now don't think I've anything against her

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moral character, but from the way she writes she ought to be here.”

“ You don’t say so, sir, you don’t say so,” replied the warder with amazement.

One day the same warder found that Wilde had difficulty in getting up. He was giddy and had a headache. He refused to see the doctor, and said that he would feel better when he had had something hot to drink. His breakfast would be served only in another hour, so the warder decided to go and warm up some beef-tea for him, regardless of the risk of dismissal and loss of pension. He poured the beef tea into a bottle, slipped it underneath his jacket, and proceeded to take it to Wilde’s cell. As he climbed the stairs, the bottle slipped inside his shirt. Just at that moment the chief warder called him to discuss some matter of administration. Meanwhile, the bottle burned his skin, and he could have cried with pain. But he bore up heroically, and when his chief went away ran to Wilde’s cell, gave him the drink, and told him what had happened. Wilde smiled as he listened, and then burst out into the merriest laugh. The good man was hurt, said so, and closed the door with a bang. An hour later he came back with Wilde’s breakfast. Wilde looked really sorry, and said that unless his friend forgave him, he would not touch his food.

"Not even the cocoa?" asked the warder.

"Not even the cocoa," was the reply. ("And he looked at it longingly," says the warder in the charming and naive account he wrote of the episode.)

"Well, rather than starve you, I'll forgive you," said the warder.

"And supposing I laugh again?" asked Wilde.

"I shan't forgive you again," said the warder, leaving the cell. But the following morning his prisoner handed him a sheet of paper, on which he had written a long, witty, and whimsical piece, headed "An Apology."

Another way in which Wilde made himself friends among the warders was by helping them to solve puzzles for a newspaper competition, and it is said that in consequence of his assistance the warders won a piano. But if some of the warders grew friendly, others did not. One day, in the winter, he was suddenly called out of his cell. "Take off your boots," said the warder. Wilde obeyed, and was left standing in the corridor, wondering what was going to happen. The stones were so cold beneath his stockinged feet that he stood on one foot at a time, and tried to warm the other with his hands. After five minutes the warder returned, and without a word threw a pair of new boots on the floor. Then he locked the prisoner back in his cell.

“ THINGS ARE WHAT THEY ARE ”

The greatest pleasure in his existence was the receipt of a quarterly letter from his friend Robert Ross. This was all he was allowed to receive. Many friends wrote, nevertheless, but the letters were kept in the governor's office, to be handed to him on his release. Major Nelson, however, always told him who had written, and sometimes even said a few words about the contents of these letters. Wilde always felt the deepest gratitude towards him, and after his release sent him copies of his plays as they were published. The letters from Ross were little masterpieces. Wilde said each of them was like a French *causerie intime*. They contained all the news in the artistic and literary world, spoke of common friends and of books that had just appeared. The warders told him much of the common news of the day, and his visitors were surprised to find how well informed he always was about the outside world.

The quarterly visits were great events, but it is not certain that they were a real pleasure to Oscar. Sometimes Ross came, at others Sherard, once Ricketts, who had illustrated some of his work. Wilde suffered much from the fact that he could not brush his boots and his hair, and that his beard was not regularly shaved. During visits he always hid the lower part of his face in a handkerchief. But he

forced himself to be gay, in order not to depress his friends.

When Wilde received his writing materials, he began to compose an immense letter to Lord Alfred Douglas. In his solitude and bitterness he had developed a strong resentment towards his friend. Ross, who considered that without Lord Alfred's influence the prosecution of Queensberry and the disaster which was its consequence would never have occurred, had communicated his views to Wilde during his few visits. Gradually, resentment grew into savage hatred, and in the course of his letter Wilde loaded his friend with reproaches. Some of the things he said were based upon palpable untruths. Others were gross exaggerations and distortions of facts that are at least open to a different interpretation. Much of the letter is evidently due to a lost sense of proportion—the result of solitary brooding. It is significant that after his liberation Wilde never referred to the matter in his talks and his correspondence with Lord Alfred.

The letter also contains original views on philosophy and life, powerfully and even beautifully written. It presents a completely pagan conception of life, based upon a profoundly sceptical individualism. Christ is portrayed as a great artist. It can hardly be said that Wilde stood before the reader of his letter as a re-

pentant sinner. He did advocate repentance of one's sins, but only because this led towards an understanding of what one had done. In other words, repentance was in his view a means of self-realisation, which, then as formerly, he considered to be the main object of life. There is noticeable throughout this letter an intense preoccupation with his own personality, which was the obvious result of excessive introspection bred by silence and loneliness. One passage is particularly remarkable, because it shows the only difference wrought in him by the events of 1895 to 1897. Wilde had at last come to the conclusion that the outside world is not as plastic as he had formerly believed. " One of the things one learns in prison," he wrote, " is that things are what they are." This is the most pregnant line in the whole manifesto.

In 1905, after Wilde's death, Robert Ross, who was his literary executor, published under the title *De Profundis* excerpts from this letter, which never reached Lord Alfred Douglas. As published, *De Profundis* is one of the greatest literary hoaxes of our age. Some readers came to the mistaken conclusion that Wilde had become both mystical and repentant. What prison actually did for him was to give him time to understand the lesson of the two sordid months before his incarceration. He knew, henceforth, that " things are what they

are." And that is why, from this moment, he gave up all attempts to create a fictitious world by his art. He looked at the world with a new sympathy, because suffering had made him realise that he was part of it. And the only work he wrote, when he returned to life, was *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, a naive, almost popular lament, utterly unlike the golden dreams of a Flaubert. It had arisen from the depths with something of the tired, experienced, worldly-wise vision of a Villon.

Repentance was so little in Oscar's mind that he tried to exculpate himself. He declared that three of the witnesses at his trial had been primed by Queensberry and his counsel, and told to pass over in silence certain things, and to make allegations which would throw upon him the responsibility for someone else's actions. If he had chosen to give this other person away, he said, he could have left the court with his head erect and his hands in his pockets.

As the time of his release drew near, he began to think of the future. He paced his cell, three steps one way, turn, three steps back, for hours on end. He planned a study of "Christ as the precursor of the romantic movement in life," a play on an Old Testament theme, perhaps a life of Moses, and various other works. He also tried to decide how he would organise his existence. Friends came to discuss where he

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would go to live. Some money had been collected for his immediate needs, but he was difficult, unable to make up his mind what to do and where to go. In the end nothing was decided.

Owing to the loss of remission during Major Isaacson's régime, Wilde had to serve his full sentence. Shortly before his release, he was informed by the governor that a party of American journalists had arrived at Reading and wanted to offer him a large sum of money for the story of his prison experiences. He refused to have anything to do with them. "I cannot understand, sir," he said to the governor, "that such proposals should be made to a gentleman."

The day before his release he was sent back to Wandsworth. Next day he was given the clothes he had worn when he was convicted, and half a sovereign, his wages for two years' hard labour.

XIV

FREEDOM AND DECAY

"He despaired and found the mud of the gutter warmer than the stones of the pavement. He had been left no other choice."—RICKETTS.

FROM prison Oscar Wilde went straight to the Brompton Oratory, where he asked to see a priest he knew. Apparently, he was toying with the idea of joining the Catholic Church. To him, as to so many people of artistic temperament, the Catholic ritual, its vestments, its pomp and its pageantry, made a sensuous appeal. Moreover, the certainties of the Church, and its radical rejection of individualism, offered a harbour of refuge to his tired mind. But the views expressed in the *De Profundis* make it clear that he was farther even from the doctrine of Catholicism than from any other supernatural creed. The visit to Brompton was the expression of one mood out of many. The priest for whom he asked happened to be away, and Wilde made no further endeavour to become a convert.

Some friends who had made arrangements for his future met Oscar and travelled with

him to Dieppe. They found him exhausted, coarsened ; his complexion and his hands had turned purple, and his teeth were abominably decayed. The first days, which were spent at Dieppe, were painful and humiliating. English residents went out of their way to show that his presence was unwelcome. In several restaurants he was refused admittance, because English people had threatened to withdraw their custom from places he frequented. On one occasion he had actually sat down to dinner with three friends at the best restaurant in Dieppe when the manager declared that he had enough dinner for three, but not for four. He drove about with Reginald Turner and Robert Ross, examining the neighbourhood with a view to finding a suitable residence. They fixed on the little village of Berneval-sur-Mer, where he took rooms at the inn.

At Berneval, Oscar Wilde knew happiness for the last time. He adopted the name of Sebastian Melmoth, and tried to forget the past. The inn was clean and agreeably situated. He was treated with great attention by the whole staff. One day he came home late and without a coat, and there was a real commotion, the entire establishment thinking of nothing but of warming Monsieur Melmoth who had been seen to shiver. His rooms were arranged with taste, there were many books, and a tall

pedestal in a corner supported a pretty Gothic Virgin. He rose every day at seven, and unless friends came to see him he was in bed by ten. The healthy life he led soon restored his physical vigour. He was a magnificent swimmer, and he enjoyed himself in the water like a child. His friends were delighted at the change a few weeks of sunshine, fresh air, and exercise had wrought in him.

It is a mistake to believe that prison killed Oscar Wilde. The French, rightly indignant at the preposterous sentence inflicted upon him, have persuaded themselves that he had one foot in the grave before he came out of prison. Gide calls him "l'être affaibli, défait, que nous avait rendu la prison." It was, however, not prison, but the whole catastrophe of which prison was only the culmination, that killed him. It was not his body, but his mind that was affected. His will power was broken, he was scarcely able to concentrate, and he produced practically nothing after his release. And his utter downfall, in the end, was still the result of the shock of 1895 which had given free play to all the pernicious hereditary and infantile influences that were his undoing. But of these things there was no question, as yet. To Rothenstein he wrote: "When I reckon up all that is *left* to me, the sun and the sea of this beautiful world; its dawns dim with

gold and its nights hung with silver ; many books, and all flowers, and a few good friends ; and a brain and a body to which health and power are not denied—really I am *rich* when I count up what I still have.” One may confidently affirm that his imprisonment had left no resentment in him. With his great power for self-delusion he had almost succeeded in making himself believe that he had arranged the course of his existence for a definite artistic purpose. “ Prison has completely changed me,” he said to Gide. “ I counted upon it for this.” In the letter to Rothenstein already quoted he explained the change effected in him by prison : “ I know, dear Will, you will be pleased to know that I have not come out of prison an embittered or disappointed man. On the contrary, in many ways I have gained much. I am not really ashamed of having been in prison ; I often was in more shameful places : but I *am* really ashamed of having led a life unworthy of an artist.”

With his old extravagance, Wilde now began to furnish and arrange a little villa, the Chalet Bourgeat, which was about two hundred yards from the inn. He went to live there at the end of June, but continued to take his meals at the inn. He made friends with everybody in the village. The customs officers were lonely. So he lent them the works of the elder Dumas to

while away the hours. He treated the school children in honour of the diamond jubilee of Queen Victoria. He often saw the parish priest and went to his services. Some young poets from Montmartre asked him to receive a delegation. He gave them a banquet in a Dieppe restaurant that was not closed against him. One day he found the poet Ernest Dowson stranded penniless at an inn at Arques. He generously helped him out of his difficulties. And he was waiting and hoping, for he expected that the following year his wife would join him with their two sons : her relatives had insisted that before their reunion Oscar should go through a year of probation.

Gradually, the first enthusiastic enjoyment of freedom waned. He was unable to work. "I am not in the mood to do the work I want," he complained, "and I fear I shall never be." Several offers were made to him. The director of *Le Journal* invited him to become a regular contributor. The offer was sound and businesslike. But he refused. He considered that at present people would read him only out of morbid curiosity, and he wanted to distinguish himself once more by a good piece of literary writing. He overflowed with plans and ideas, but found it impossible to put any of them into execution. Country life began to bore him. He was so essentially a townsman, and he had

often said before that work was impossible in the country. He found himself pining for Paris, and one day, suddenly, he decided to go there.

In Paris Oscar lived from hand to mouth, on the money that was being collected for him by friends, and was regularly paid over to him by Robert Ross. Other friends, in particular Frank Harris and Lord Alfred Douglas, also gave him considerable sums of money. Lord Alfred took him to his villa at Posilipo, near Naples. There he stayed several months, and there he managed to put the final touches to his *Ballad of Reading Gaol*. But Lord Alfred's mother threatened to stop her son's allowance unless he separated from Wilde. He therefore gave Oscar more money and returned to France. The fact that the two friends had met was used by the relatives of Constance Wilde as a reason for preventing the reunion which might have restored Oscar's sense of responsibility. He now began to decline rapidly.¹ When the money he had received from Lord Alfred was spent, he returned to Paris. On another occasion, Frank Harris took him to the south of France, but again he returned to Paris, from which he seemed no longer able to keep away. He drank heavily, and became a slave to absinthe. When he had money, he lived luxuriously. He realised that the master-

¹ It is said that he was syphilitic.

piece which was to rehabilitate him would never be written, and allowed himself to drift. He wanted more and more money, and seemed to consider that it was the duty of his friends to provide it. To each friend he said that the others were mean and did nothing for him. He even resorted to dishonesty in order to come by money. He made the scenario for a play, and sold the exclusive rights to four or five different people. One thing interested him still : prison reform. He wrote two articles on the subject for the *Daily Chronicle*, which drew much attention and proved that if he could have brought himself to write regularly he would have had no difficulty in earning his living.

He first settled at a small hotel in the Rue Marsollier, from which he was turned out because he could not pay his bill. Then he went to the Hôtel d'Alsace, a fifth-rate establishment in the Rue des Beaux Arts, near the Quai Voltaire where he had emulated the labours and the splendour of Balzac fifteen years before. The landlord, Dupoirier, was the soul of generosity. He paid the bill at the previous hotel, and brought Oscar's luggage to his new home. Behind it lay a small yard, where he sat in the afternoons, reading and drinking absinthe.

Gradually, many of his friends grew tired of Oscar, and turned their backs on him. He had

resumed his former habits.¹ He began to neglect his appearance. André Gide met him late in 1898, and noticed that, though he was still decently dressed, his hat had lost its gloss and his collar its freshness. The sleeves of his frock-coat were slightly frayed. A year later, Rothenstein found him "shabby and down at heel." There were still momentary flashes of the old Oscar. Under the stimulus of drink, he could be witty and gay. But his gaiety was unconvincing. Some people, however, remember that, as late even as the last months of his life, he could, when in the presence of two or three old friends, be as brilliant as he had ever been. On such occasions also a difference could be noticed. There was an unwonted gentleness in his manner. It was almost as though he were apologetic for being there at all.

He suffered more and more from headaches. A doctor told him that he could be saved only if he gave up drink. This he flatly declined to do. Then he was advised to have an operation for which he could not afford to pay. "I am dying beyond my means," he said with a last effort at a joke. He was certain that he would not see the new century. In October 1900 he had to take to his bed. It would appear that he had some form of meningitis. But by the

¹ This is denied by Sherard. But see Rothenstein, i. p. 362, not to mention Harris, ii. *passim*.

end of the month he felt better. With some difficulty, he went out for a walk in the afternoon of the 29th, and had a drink at a little café in the Latin Quarter. He drove to the Bois de Boulogne on the next day. This was the last time he went out. He lingered on for another month, suffering intense pain, and faithfully nursed by Reginald Turner and the proprietor of the hotel, and during the last days also by Robert Ross. On November 29th Ross, who was a convert to Catholicism, fetched a priest who baptised him and administered extreme unction. He was probably unconscious while this happened, and never regained consciousness. The next morning the death-rattle set in, and he died at ten minutes to two in the afternoon of November 30th.

He was buried at Bagneux on December 3rd. There was lime in the soil of the cemetery : its effect was to preserve the body, for when he was exhumed, in 1909, Robert Ross recognised his friend, whose face had not altered except for a long growth of hair. Ross himself placed the remains in a new coffin. It was removed to the Père Lachaise cemetery, where a monument by Epstein was erected to the memory of Oscar Wilde.

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